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Social partners: barriers and enablers

Simone Baglioni, Tom Montgomery and Francesca Calò

Introduction

Chapter 6 undertakes a study of the role that social partners and social dialogue can play in integrating migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in the labour market. Social partners play a key role in labour market dynamics as they contribute towards determining the policy and legal frameworks that shape labour markets, but also the social, political and economic trends in which labour markets are embedded (Auer, 2001). Therefore, an examination of social partners' understanding of the newcomers' capacities and their appreciation of the opportunities and challenges to be addressed is unavoidable in any research willing to understand how to facilitate unlocking the employment potential of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers.

When social partners are at stake with reference to migration and asylum, extant research has investigated primarily the role of unions (Penninx and Roosblad, 2000; Marino et al, 2015, 2017; Refslund, 2021) while scarcer attention has been paid to the employers' side (OECD and UNHCR, 2016; Adecco Group, 2017) and even fewer studies have investigated the role of social dialogue. Hence, our chapter fills a gap in the existing literature as it presents findings from a four-month-long process of fieldwork of interviews with social partners (gathering overall 123 interviews) complemented by an experts' survey which managed to collect responses from 293 additional social partners' representatives across our seven countries.

The debate surrounding migrants and refugees in European countries is often polarised around two dominant narratives. One that portrays newcomers as a burden for the public budget and the welfare state, casting them as people in constant need of support and services. Another which highlights their activity in the labour market and depicts them as potential competitors with the 'native' workforce (Berg, 2015; Ferrera and Pellegata, 2018). Within such polarised debates, social partners as well as 'hybrid' corporate actors such as social cooperatives and social enterprises have articulated a range of positions which sometimes appear to be diverging (Scalise and Burroni, 2020). For example, trade unions have been faced by the dilemma of including or excluding newcomers from their activities and

membership when inclusion could be considered a ‘betrayal’ of native and traditional workforces exposed to the risk of ‘social dumping’ and further deregulation, or conversely, whether or not migrants could be considered as an untapped reservoir of labour solidarity whose recruitment may mitigate against well-established long-term declines in trade union density across the European (particularly young and precarious) workforce (Penninx and Roosblad, 2000; Mackenzie and Forde, 2009; Gorodzeisky and Richards, 2013; Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman, 2013). On the other hand, employers have been supportive of migrants meeting the market-driven flexible and cyclical shape of labour demand, in particular (but not only) in agricultural and tourism seasonal work, as well as in personal and home care services or in the construction sector (Van Hooren, 2012; Berntsen, 2016). While social enterprises and the social economy have favoured migrants in part to respond to the same workforce needs in the service (for example social care) industry, but also to promote more innovative and inclusive business models and a new generation of entrepreneurs (Harina and Freudenber, 2020).

In the discussion that follows we present findings which demonstrate how social partners perceive and portray the contribution that extra-EU migrants, refugees and asylum seekers bring to European economies and societies, but also their ideas about the (still many) barriers and (few) opportunities that can be crucial in determining the transition to decent work for newcomers. In this chapter we elaborate common threads and contrasts that have emerged from the social partners’ expert survey we have conducted to complement our in-depth interviews.

Methods

Underpinning the findings of this chapter is a research design that is committed to a mixed methods approach. The approach was operationalised through three key elements: (1) a review of the existing literature on social partnership and its intersection with the labour market integration of migrants and refugees across each country; (2) an online experts’ survey of social partners conducted across each of the countries with the purpose of exploring the views, values, attitudes, expectations and behaviours of social partners, and how these vary across countries; and (3) semi-structured interviews with social partners across each of the countries designed to elaborate key issues of labour market integration with social partners, such as skills shortages that could be filled by migrants, tensions between migrant and native workers, the role of informal labour markets, the involvement of social partners in policy design, and the role of collective bargaining and social dialogue in the integration process. Through adopting this mixed method approach we were thus able to glean a complementary quantitative

and qualitative insight into the barriers and enablers of labour market integration for migrants and refugees from the perspective of social partner organisations across Europe and the similarities and variations that exist across these distinct contexts.

Our questionnaire covered questions including the perception of migrants and refugees as an asset or burden, how social partners perceived the skills levels of migrants and refugees as well as questions relating directly to the issue of social dialogue and labour market integration. As with our survey questionnaire, the interview guide was designed to elicit responses from social partners that would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the issues explored in our online survey.

In terms of our sampling, each of the teams undertook the same process to construct their national samples of social partner organisations. Firstly, teams were asked to take into consideration the findings of our earlier work, reported in [Chapter 1](#) of the book, and the sectors identified as having the potential to absorb migrant and refugee workers. Next, we asked teams to draw upon those sources from previous research to identify key actors in sectors which held potential for the labour market integration of migrants and refugees. We then asked teams to map large umbrella organisations (for example, trade union confederations, employer representative organisations, business federations, and so on) of social partners in each of their countries to assist in populating their national samples. Teams were asked to draw upon the membership of these large umbrella bodies to identify key individuals who could be potential research participants. These same samples were utilised by researchers across the research teams to recruit participants for both the online survey and the semi-structured interviews. Once the national samples were constructed teams were asked to contact those key individuals identified within social partner organisations to participate in our research.

[Table 6.1](#) presents the experts' distribution across social partners' categories by country (although our survey was overall taken by 293 experts, we have decided to include in most of the analyses that follow only responses by those who had filled in at least 70 per cent of the survey, to allow us to report experts' views with a higher reliability degree given the complexity and length of the survey itself). Unions are the most popular category, with overall 110 experts responding to our survey (ranging from 28 in Finland to seven in Greece and Italy); employers' organisations are the second most frequent category with overall 46 expert-respondents (ranging from 16 experts having responded to the survey in Switzerland to one in Greece and the UK); but we have also captured overall seven experts from chambers of commerce; and finally we have 33 experts overall responding from a mix of categories including private companies, social enterprises, professional guilds and associations of precarious workers.

Table 6.1: Distribution of survey expert respondents by social partner categories (by country)

Social partners	Countries							
	Czech Republic	Denmark	Finland	Greece	Italy	Switzerland	UK	Total
Unions	19	18	28	7	7	10	21	110
Employers	7	4	12	1	5	16	1	46
Chambers of commerce	1	0	0	1	3	0	2	7
Mixed category*	12	3	0	6	8	7	0	33
Total	39	25	40	15	23	33	24	199

Note: We have included in the analysis only respondents who completed at least 70 per cent of the survey. * This category includes: private company (Denmark, Italy, Switzerland), social enterprises (Denmark, Greece, Italy), association of precarious workers (Greece), professional guild (Greece, Switzerland).

Newcomers' skills: an unlocked potential?

As a way to begin discussing the extent to which social partners appreciate the contribution that migrants provide to European labour markets and wider society, we can consider experts' responses to the question: 'What perception do you have of the skills levels of most migrants or refugees arriving in your country?'. As discussed by the literature, with reference to trade unions, the understanding that social partners have of migrants depends upon other factors such as the characteristics of migrants themselves and the experience that a given country has had with immigration. [Table 6.2](#) provides a first piece of evidence to support such an assumption: results point to a different appreciation of newcomers depending on their (legal) status or reason for immigration. While two-thirds of social partners think that so-called economic migrants are either highly skilled or moderately skilled, the percentage goes down to less than one in every two for refugees. Conversely, only one in five respondents believe economic migrants do not possess meaningful skills, versus almost one in every two thinking the same for refugees. Such results resonate with a popular, albeit not evidence-based, assumption that those who migrate to seek a better life or to seek an economic advantage arrive with more skills than those who enter Europe to escape violence and persecution at home. Although evidence suggests that asylum seekers and refugees experience an extremely stressful situation which may hinder their wellbeing and capacity to work, the skills they have acquired in their earlier life and work do not disappear as they move forward. Hence, we should refrain from an aprioristic evaluation of people's skills on the simple basis of the reason for their arrival.

Table 6.2: Respondents' perception of newcomers' skills by type of newcomers

	Migrants	Refugees
Highly skilled	22%	7%
Moderately skilled	58%	45%
Low skilled	20%	48%
N	167%	161%
Total	100%	100%

However, we can also interpret such a sharp contrast in the appreciation of the skills of economic migrants and refugees as an awareness among social partners that refugees and in general migrants seeking international and humanitarian protection, due to the stressful and perilous circumstances under which they flee their home countries, might need more bespoke services of support and guidance to assist in properly preparing them to enter the labour market and progress in their employment.

We next turn to those perceptions of newcomers' skills across types of social partners. [Table 6.3](#) presents our findings which consider four categories of social partners: trade unions, employers, chambers of commerce, and a residual category of other organisations, which is mainly composed of social enterprises and cooperatives. Although the different appreciation of economic migrants and refugees mentioned earlier occurs across all social partner categories, except for our 'other' category, which shows a more balanced appreciation between the two types of newcomers, there are some differences among social partners that warrant closer scrutiny. For example, trade unions appear to have a stronger appreciation of newcomers' skills than the other social partners: in fact, 29 per cent of experts from trade unions consider economic migrants to possess high skills while only 14 per cent of employers' organisations and chambers of commerce believe this to be the case, while slightly lower than that (9 per cent) believe the same among the residual 'other' category. Such a finding contrasts with extant studies that have critically pointed to the 'weak' attitude of unions towards migrants ([Lucio and Perrett, 2009](#); [Connolly et al, 2014](#)). Although not openly challenging such an understanding, it does provide evidence that although unions may express concerns regarding social dumping, they appear to be the most open category among social partners towards migrants. Moreover, most respondents across the three categories consider economic migrants to be arriving with an existing set of skills (with 'moderately skilled' as the response item which scores highest across all social partners groups for economic migrants).

To what extent does such a picture change if we consider differences between countries? Social partners' appreciation of migrants' skills in fact

Table 6.3: Responses to the question 'What perception do you have of the skills levels of most migrants and refugees?'

	Unions		Employers		Chambers of commerce		Other	
	M	R	M	R	M	R	M	R
Highly skilled	29%	10%	14%	6%	14%	0%	9%	0%
Moderately skilled	54%	42%	64%	39%	72%	80%	55%	65%
Low skilled	16%	48%	22%	55%	14%	20%	36%	35%
N	92	90	36	36	7	5	22	20
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Note: M = migrants; R = refugees

needs to be contextualised, as at least four contextual aspects affect social partners' attitude towards migrants: (1) the role of trade unions in society, the more institutionalised and organised, the less inclined they are to opening up employment and their own ranks to newcomers; (2) the labour market structure and dynamics (which sectors are generating a higher demand for migrants and to what extent are these sectors unionised); (3) wider societal trends (consensual versus conflictual traditions, political polarisation, and so on); (4) characteristics of the migrants (type, origin and earlier experiences with unions) (Marino et al, 2015). Countries such as Italy, Greece and the Czech Republic, which have primarily attracted migrants to take up jobs requiring fewer qualifications, mainly in the agriculture, manufacture and the care sectors, or which are employed in the irregular economy, show a smaller share of social partners perceiving migrants as highly skilled individuals than in other countries. In Greece, our social partner experts have a particularly poor perception of the skillset of refugees: 43 per cent of social partners who responded to our survey consider refugees as being low skilled. While in countries that either have a long tradition of immigration such as the UK, or in countries where migrants have also been employed in skilled occupations, there is a far more developed appreciation of migrants' skills. For example, in the UK more than half of the social partners who responded to our expert survey consider both economic migrants and refugees as arriving with well-developed skills; and in Finland four out of ten experts consider migrants arriving with high skills and another five out of ten consider them bearing some skills.

The overall economic and labour market appreciation of newcomers among social partners is also revealed by another question of our expert survey which asked whether respondents considered migrants and refugees primarily an asset or a burden for their countries. Narratives of migration and asylum have abundantly speculated upon the cost of hosting migrants

and in particular refugees, one example being the UK debate which involved consistent tropes regarding ‘bogus asylum seekers’ and ‘scrounger migrants’ which have affected not only British debates and immigration policies (Squire, 2016), but also the country’s most important political decision of the century – that is, the exit from the European Union (Baglioni et al, 2019). However, our findings reveal that, overall, social partners across our countries do not subscribe to the anti-migrant rhetoric: almost eight out of ten respondents consider migrants an asset or more an asset than a burden for their countries, and one in every two has the same appreciation for refugees (hence, again, a clear difference appears in appreciation: favouring migrants versus refugees). If we consider cross-country variations, only in the Czech Republic is there a consistent share (one-third) of social partners among those who responded to our survey who consider newcomers as only being a burden, while in Denmark, Finland and Switzerland, a similar share of respondents considers refugees to be more of a burden than an asset (respectively 24 per cent, 41 per cent and 25 per cent of respondents) (data not shown here for sake of space).

If we consider how the same question scores across types of social partners (Table 6.4), our data reveal that, overall, trade unions, employers’ organisations, chambers of commerce and other types of organisations have a similar relatively high degree of appreciation of newcomers, and in particular of economic migrants. But employers’ organisations are those presenting the highest scores for responses considering refugees more as a

Table 6.4: Responses to the question ‘Are migrants and refugees more of an asset or a burden for our societies?’ by type of social partner

	Unions		Employers		Chambers of commerce		Other	
	M	R	M	R	M	R	M	R
Only an asset	29%	18%	14%	3%	29%	33%	19%	16%
More of an asset than a burden	51%	33%	61%	28%	71%	33%	52%	42%
<i>Subtotal positive view</i>	<i>80%</i>	<i>51%</i>	<i>75%</i>	<i>31%</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>66%</i>	<i>71%</i>	<i>58%</i>
Only a burden	7%	7%	6%	8%	0%	0%	5%	11%
More of a burden than an asset	3%	25%	8%	36%	0%	0%	10%	5%
<i>Subtotal negative view</i>	<i>10%</i>	<i>32%</i>	<i>14%</i>	<i>44%</i>	<i>0%</i>	<i>0%</i>	<i>15%</i>	<i>16%</i>
Neither an asset nor a burden	10%	17%	11%	25%	0%	34%	14%	26%
N	94	94	36	36	7	6	21	19
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Note: M = migrants; R = refugees

burden than an asset, a finding which seems to suggest that although there are consistent examples of businesses and companies vocal in their support for labour market integration, including for the most vulnerable groups of newcomers, there is still room for improvement in the private sector for a full understanding of the potential which lies within refugees and asylum seekers that still remains unrealised.

Are newcomers disrupting national labour markets?

Much of the scepticism that social partners, and in particular trade unions, have shown towards migrants is related to the potentially disruptive effect that newcomers can have on the labour market of receiving societies (Marino et al, 2017). They can be perceived as representing a ‘cheap’ and docile workforce which can be employed at a lower economic and social cost than local or native workers (Krings, 2009). Hence, there is a fear that they may generate social dumping, reduce the already shrinking employment opportunities of the lower skilled local workforce, and contribute towards jeopardising the leverage of trade unions in wage negotiation and employment regulation dynamics (Lillie and Greer, 2007). In fact, evidence suggests that the potential negative impact of the entry of newcomers in a given labour market might be stronger in the period immediately following their entrance in the country, as they might be tempted or forced by restrictive regulations and inadequate integration opportunities to enter the irregular market/economy, might be available to work at lower-than-average salaries, and compete with local lower skilled workers (IMF, 2016). In the longer term, when newcomers stabilise their position, are more confident and, importantly, legally entitled to consider the wider range of jobs available, their competition effect upon locals declines substantially. Still, in the vulgarised, politically motivated, narrative of the effect of migrants on native workers, the fear of newcomers stealing jobs is strong in some political discourses and particularly right-wing populist narratives (Lucassen and Lubbers, 2012; Gorodzeisky and Semyonov, 2016).

Our expert survey asked if the arrival of migrants had created tensions in the labour market of the respondents’ countries. Table 6.5 shows that social partner experts seem to share, at least to a certain extent, the idea that a tension exists between newcomers and native workers, and in fact almost one in every two of our respondents admit the arrival of newcomers has created tensions in the labour market (Table 6.5). Moreover, consistent with the literature (Holgate, 2005; Perrett et al, 2012; Connolly et al, 2014; Alberti and Però, 2018), trade unions appear to be the actor most concerned by such tensions between newcomers and the local workforce. However, experts’ answers to such a question depend also upon the type of actor/sector they represent. As shown by the Finnish case, trade unions representing

Table 6.5: Responses to the question 'Has the arrival of migrants or refugees created tensions in the labour market in your country with native workers?'

	Migrants	Refugees
Yes	45%	43%
No	55%	57%
N	164	160
Total	100%	100%

sectors of the labour market with stronger concentrations of highly skilled workers tend to adopt a more liberal approach to immigration than those unions representing blue-collar employees or workers with fewer skills and educational levels. In the former case, the native workforce is protected by the requirements needed to enter these professions while in the latter workers are more exposed to competition. Such a perspective is similarly distributed across our countries, with the most concerned respondents being in the Czech Republic and those least concerned in Switzerland and the UK. The Czech case seems a particularly interesting one in this regard: the country's social partners recognise the role that immigrant workers play in an economy blessed by low unemployment rates and in need of a foreign workforce, still, trade unions show some concern about the tensions that the arrival of newcomers in local labour markets may bring. Such tensions appear most salient either for those foreign workers that operate through jobs agencies or those who take up highly qualified positions in the health sectors such as doctors and nurses from Ukraine.

Among the experts who answered yes to our question about the arrival of newcomers having created tensions in the labour market of their host country, [Table 6.6](#) shows that the most pertinent reasons for such tensions to occur are related with the perceived competition for jobs brought by migrants, and connected to this aspect, the risk of lower wages. However, the causes of tensions are also considered to be the perceived cultural differences, and related to this aspect, the perceived religious differences. Yet, respondents recognise that tensions around migration issues can also originate from outside of the labour market, emanating from those tensions that result from the actions and rhetoric of political entrepreneurs seeking to gain political advantage by spreading fears and exploiting social vulnerabilities. In fact, the role of populist parties is recognised as a cause of tensions by one in every two respondents ([Table 6.6](#)). While the role of policymakers at various territorial levels is residually mentioned as an origin of those tensions related with labour migration.

When adopting a comparative cross-country view of the causes of increased tensions with reference to newcomers and the labour market, we

Table 6.6: Causes of tensions (this response item applied only to those who responded positively to the question on tensions in the labour market provoked by migrants)

Perceived competition for jobs	65%
Perceived cultural differences	64%
Populist parties	51%
Perceived lowering wages	44%
Perceived religious differences	40%
National policymakers	17%
EU policymakers	11%
Regional policymakers	5%
Local policymakers	1%
Total N	85

noticed a difference between countries in which the perceived competition between migrants and local workers for jobs is a salient issue (Greece, Italy, Switzerland and the UK) and those countries in which job competition is a relevant concern but not as important as perceived cultural differences (the Czech Republic, Denmark and Finland). Concerning the Nordic countries, we should bear in mind their well-established patterns of tripartite agreements that regulate every aspect of the labour market and the employment experience. The institutional strength of their social partners, and in particular trade unions, does effectively discourage social dumping, and therefore it is unsurprising that tensions regarding labour migration are more directed towards cultural and religious differences. While in countries with high unemployment rates and large irregular labour markets, such as Greece and Italy, but also in countries such as the UK and Switzerland with less powerful unions and, for the latter, a long-standing issue of contested cross-border workers, the concerns surrounding job competition and social dumping are dominant.

As vividly summarised by an employers' organisation representative interviewed in Greece:

'The role of immigrants in the Greek economy is certainly positive. Many small businesses would have been shut down if they had not immigrant workers willing to work hard and with relatively low wages. Also, many big companies might have left Greece and headed for another country in the Balkans with lower wages. However, we must not forget that the weak negotiating position of immigrants and refugees often leads them to the irregular economy. This is a negative consequence of their presence.' (Greece, Employers' organisation)

Finally, it is worth noting that only in the Czech Republic and Denmark – for different reasons – are EU policymakers considered to be stoking tensions on labour migration. In Denmark, perhaps this is due to the country’s usually protective stance towards any attempt by the EU to Europeanise social policies, which are perceived as attempts to challenge its welfare state, its tripartite based labour market and industrial relations system, and its wage system. Moreover, in the Czech Republic, perhaps the identification of EU policymakers as sources of tension can be attributed to the country’s reluctance to adhere to the EU system of quota distribution for asylum seekers and relatedly the EU’s more open approach towards internal mobility and intra-EU migration.

Furthermore, in our expert survey we also gathered opinions about the tools to be used to mitigate the potential harmful effect of the competition between newcomers and native workers (Table 6.7). Unsurprisingly, social partners’ traditional actions, such as social dialogue or increased trade union representation, are popular mitigating tools among respondents, but also employment inspections and minimum wages are viable options according to our social partners. In particular, the need to improve those tools and resources to implement workplace inspections appear to be salient measures in Italy and in Greece. In the former, further inspections could perhaps contribute towards reducing the massive use of irregular workers in the agriculture industry of Southern regions and the terrible consequences this has had on the lives of the immigrants involved. As elaborated by a trade union representative in Greece: “It is important to increase controls. Arbitrary actions exist when controls are not intense.”

Measures that are often invoked by political parties and policymakers, such as entry quotas or entry restrictions, are rarely mentioned as being useful (with only 8 per cent of our expert respondents selecting these measures).

Table 6.7: Tools to mitigate competition between migrants and natives (this response item applied only to those who responded positively to the question about such a competition and multiple responses were allowed)

Social dialogue	60%
Employment inspections	41%
Minimum wages	40%
Greater union representation	40%
Migrant quotas	16%
Entry restrictions	8%
Other	8%
Total N	134

Barriers and enablers according to social partners' experts

Statistical data on the labour market integration of third country nationals in the EU shows the existence of a long-standing gap between migrants' and European citizens' employment rate given that the former score much lower than the latter (see [Chapter 2](#) in this volume and Eurostat data on migration and labour market integration¹). This gap is even more pronounced when women and young people are at stake. Such a gap speaks to an employment potential which remains largely unrealised for third country nationals. The social partner experts we have engaged with in our survey seem to be aware of the newcomers' employment potential situation as well as the need to address the employment gap, but they also appear to be acutely aware of the work that needs to be done for refugees rather than for economic migrants. [Table 6.8](#) shows that almost half the respondents consider the potential of economic migrants relatively realised. In contrast, only one out of ten considers the labour potential of refugees to be fully realised. Six out of ten consider the employment potential of migrants to be only slightly realised, and one-third believe that refugees' labour market potential is still completely untapped.

When asked to indicate the most relevant causes preventing the full realisation of migrants or refugees' employment potential ([Table 6.9](#)), social partners point to language proficiency, but also legal and administrative hurdles that make getting into employment difficult for newcomers. In addition, a lack of effective mechanisms for the recognition of qualifications, a lack of services that support integration, skills mismatches, discrimination, cultural differences and poor knowledge about the labour market of the host country are all identified by our experts. However, only one in ten of our respondents focused upon economy related issues.

Consistent with the causes, the remedies ([Table 6.10](#)) point to the need to have more language classes provision, but also different migration

Table 6.8: Responses to the question 'Do you think that the employment potential of migrants or refugees is fully realised?'

	Migrants	Refugees
Fully realised	4%	1%
Somewhat realised	40%	8%
Slightly realised	42%	57%
Not realised at all	15%	34%
N	159	154
Total	100%	100%

Table 6.9: Responses to the question 'What are the most important factors that prevent the full realisation of migrants or refugees' employment capacities? (Please select every option that applies)'

Language issues	79%
Legal/administrative issues/immigration policy	61%
Lack of recognition of qualifications	55%
Lack of services to support integration	45%
Skills mismatch	44%
Discrimination	42%
Cultural differences	41%
Lack of knowledge regarding the national job market	37%
Economy related issues	14%
Total N	159

Table 6.10: Responses to the questions 'What are the most effective factors in facilitating labour market entry? (Please select every option that applies)'

Increase language services	118
Migration policies	87
Support for job search	77
Skills matching	73
Anti-discrimination policies	62
Job mentoring	59
Skills profiling	57
Anti-exploitation policies	53
CV preparation and interview	50
Volunteering opportunities	27
Total N	164

policies, given that, as we have shown in [Chapter 3](#), current legislation makes it very difficult for third country nationals, and in particular for asylum seekers, to enter the labour market and gain regular, stable and decent employment. Social partners indicate that better job search support services, along with skills matching, skills profiling and job mentoring, could improve the employment situation of third country nationals. Furthermore, anti-discrimination and anti-exploitation policies (or a more effective implementation of these) would help too. Only a small proportion of respondents considered volunteering opportunities as something that could help third country nationals find employment.

Table 6.11: Responses to the question 'Are policies effective in filling skills shortages?'

Very effective	1%
Somewhat effective	15%
Slightly effective	43%
Not effective at all	33%
I am not aware of these policies	8%
Total N	148

The data presented thus far should be discussed while bearing in mind what social partners think about the existing policies operating in their countries to address skills shortages. In fact, if the employment potential of newcomers is far from being fully realised, in most countries there are skills shortages which migrants could contribute towards mitigating if they could be allowed to work or be properly supported/prepared for employment. [Table 6.11](#) shows responses to the question about the effectiveness of policies to address skills shortages: one-third of the social partners we interviewed believe that such policies are not effective at all, and almost half consider such policies to be only slightly effective. Overall, only one out of ten considers policies to be effective. This result is consistent across the countries of our study, apart from Switzerland in which most survey respondents consider the country's policies in this area to be somewhat effective.

A configuration of ineffective policies to address skills needs which newcomers might address and an environment which is often legally and socially obstructive, with poor opportunities to have qualifications and skills recognised, can lead to a situation in which newcomers end up working in the irregular economy. As migrants enter such employment, they risk being trapped in such sections of the labour market, resulting in a large-scale waste of talent. In some countries, third country nationals may end up in precarious, and sometimes irregular, work. Social partners are aware of this scenario and in fact two-thirds of them consider newcomers to be more exposed than native workers to the health and safety risks ([Guldenmund et al, 2013](#); [Moyce and Schenker, 2018](#)) often associated with those sections of the labour market ([Table 6.12](#)).

Finally, we must consider if social dialogue, often thought as the right tool to be used in labour migration regulation (ILO, 2014) is purposively used to improve migrants' labour market experience. Slightly less than one in every two respondents say that their organisation has been involved in social dialogue processes in the past five years in the specific field of migration. On the one hand, such a finding could be considered a positive sign given the difficult years trade unions have been experiencing in the past decades due to de-unionisation and changes in the labour market ([Ebbinghaus and](#)

Table 6.12: Responses to the question 'Do you think that the health and safety risks faced by migrants and refugees are higher than, the same as, or lower than the risks faced by the native workforce?'

Definitely a higher risk	34%
A slightly higher risk	33%
The same risk	32%
Definitely a lower risk	1%
A slightly lower risk	0%
Total	100%
N	145

Visser, 1999; Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman, 2013). On the other hand, however, given the salient role immigration has played in public and political debates across Europe, the result (data not shown here) of less than one in every two respondents having being part of social dialogue processes on the topic tells us something about the real commitment that social and political actors have in resolving immigration issues. Moreover, there are no major differences across countries in these results, apart from Finland, where a lower share of respondents (one-third) declares having engaged in social dialogue processes while two-thirds had not.

When we investigate the reasons for the lack of social dialogue engagement on labour migration issues (Table 6.13), respondents point to either political issues (primarily the lack of political will to engage in social dialogue tout-court) or labour migration dialogue issues (policymakers across Europe consider migration a minefield which could threaten their re-election). But reasons for limited social dialogue development are also contingent to the specificities of third country nationals, most of whom are poorly or not unionised at all and therefore unions do not feel membership pressure to get involved, nor do they see an immediate advantage in spending resources to protect categories who are not among their members (Penninx and Roosblad, 2000). As shown in the Finnish and in the Czech cases, foreign workers often come from countries in which unions are not recognised and known as genuine tools of democratic participation and interest representation. On the contrary they are perceived as potentially dangerous bodies. Hence, when unions intervene on migration issues, they often tend to intervene to shelter their members from the potential of social dumping that newcomers represented rather than to advance migrants' rights, as mentioned earlier in the introductory section. Moreover, the causes of poor social dialogue engagement among social partners are contingent to the labour market segmentation, and the channelling of labour migrants into the irregular economy: it is only when migrant workers shift from precarious

Table 6.13: Responses to the question ‘Which factors prevent the development of opportunities for social dialogue (negotiation and consultation between organised workers and employers which can often include policymakers, for example, collective bargaining) on migration and labour migration (if more than one, please select the three most important)?’

Lack of political will to strengthen social dialogue	32%
Lack of political will to resolve labour migration issues	32%
Weak unionisation specifically among migrants and refugees	29%
Weak unionisation generally	20%
Large informal/irregular sector/market	20%
Lack of will among employers to strengthen social dialogue	16%
Lack of will among employers to resolve labour migration issues	12%

legal and employment statuses into more stable ones that they eventually recognise the relevance of trade union membership.

Conclusion

Social partners across Europe are a crucial component in labour market regulation and in connected social, policy and economic dynamics. In some countries social partners are, along with political actors and institutions, part of well-established systems of bargain and negotiation which cover issues such as wages, working hours, and workers/employers’ rights and entitlements applying to the entire country or sector of the economy in that country. In contrast, in other countries, social partners occupy a less central position due to economic or purely political dynamics, but still it is through their organisation that employment takes form: companies and business provide opportunities of employment, and unions try to interject in the employer–employee relationship with results that vary across countries. Hence, regardless of the influence and power they have in their societies, unions, employers’ organisations, and cooperatives or social enterprises are the social and economic actors through which third country nationals can gain employment and as such we need to consider their perspectives when studying the causes that prevent newcomers from gaining access to full and decent employment, and the remedies that can be developed.

The responses of the experts we surveyed reveal that some of the key issues that had been discussed by extant studies, and in particular the dilemmas faced by unions vis-à-vis migrants, are still relevant. Our data also reveal an awareness among social partners of the higher (compared to local workers) risks that migrants face in terms of their health and safety due to the poor regulations which often confine newcomers to employment in the irregular

economy, or to jobs requiring lower skills and which offer poorer prospects of progression.

However, our survey also reveals the appreciation that social partners have of migrants' skills, of their potential contribution to the wellbeing of our societies and economies, a potential which very often remains unrealised. This is due to reasons that are on the one hand pertinent to our society's regulation of migration and on the other hand connected with the characteristics of the migrants themselves (language proficiency, social capital, personal wellbeing and health). What we can take from this preliminary analysis of social partners is the need for both policymakers at various levels of government and social partners to commit to create further social dialogue opportunities. Too few cases of social dialogue have occurred across our seven countries in the field of labour migration, but social dialogue seems to us a (if not *the*) fundamental tool to begin proper efforts to resolve problems occurring in such a polarised domain of migration, and in what is even a more contentious one, that of labour migration. Rather than leaving space to single-actor claims and activities, even when these are very positive in terms of problem solving, we should encourage a more coordinated multi-actor effort based on dialogue and mutual understanding, as represented by social dialogue.

Note

¹ www.eurostat.eu

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