



Funded by EU  
Project number: 101126535

## POLICYBRIEF

# JUSTMIG

## Estonia

Jaan Masso, Liis Roosaar, Kaire Piirsalu-Kivihall



UNIVERSITY OF TARTU  
School of Economics  
and Business Administration

### SUMMARY / EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Migrants in the food production and retail sector in Estonia largely consider themselves only temporary in these low-wage jobs that do not require education or language skills. The migrants do not have enough knowledge about the Estonian labour market, and most likely, they have not joined trade unions. Although the wage is low, most employers pay above the required minimum and follow the Estonian Employment Contracts Act. The biggest challenge, according to our study, is paving the way for migrant workers to better job opportunities and integration into Estonian society.

### INTRODUCTION

In all the EU countries, the permanent reliance on temporary employment of migrant workers has grown significantly. In Estonia, for years, strict quotas on the number of immigrants have arguably hindered the hiring of migrant workers. However, due to numerous exceptions to quota, the use of migrant workers in the Estonian economy is widespread. Continuing labour shortages underline the importance of migrant issues in the social dialogue. Continuing labour shortages accentuate

migrant-related topics in social dialogue. While employers actively call for deregulation, the trade unions are less visible in this discussion and more careful, stressing the need to ensure fair working conditions. Extending the lawful period of stay for seasonal workers and setting gradually new exceptions to the quota have been the regulatory responses to alleviate the tension.

In Estonia, the temporary employment of migrant workers often does not arise from fixed-term contracts (excluding seasonal workers). Estonian labour law requires that fixed-term contracts stipulate conditions for work that are known to end by a specific period. It is even relatively easier to terminate a permanent contract. Thus, the temporary nature of migrant employment more often relates to migrants' plans to move on to better-paying jobs. Many migrants have higher education, and they work in the food processing or retail sector only temporarily until they have acquired a higher level of Estonian language sufficient to find a job that matches their education.

## CONTEXT

The Russian-Ukrainian war has tremendously changed the composition of the pool of migrants in Estonia. Instead of migrant workers, the war-related influx has brought to Estonia many Ukrainian citizens who already had a decent, well-paid job in Ukraine. A relatively high number of Russians (about 20%) living in Estonia may be one of the reasons why Ukrainian citizens have chosen Estonia as their destination country for war-related migration.

The migrants rather easily find jobs in the food processing or retail sectors, where many firms rely on the migrant workforce in case of lower-level jobs. The working conditions might not be attractive to the locals (e.g. due to shift work and inconvenient temperatures or low salaries). Often, most colleagues in such firms can be Russians or Ukrainians, and there is no need to use the Estonian language while working. A job could also be found in a small shop or food production unit owned by compatriots. However, the results of the two surveyed sectors cannot be generalised to the whole economy. For example, our study did not identify negative pressures on working conditions due to the risk of expulsion from Estonia if an employment contract is terminated. As most of the migrant workers interviewed in these sectors were women, the interviews did not reflect the problems related to the possible expulsion of Ukrainian men from Estonia (like possible invitation to the Ukrainian military).

## ANALYSIS / DISCUSSION

**Pathways to Employment and Barriers to Advancement.** In-depth interviews with migrant workers indicated the importance of a network of friends or acquaintances for finding work. Temporary work agencies were usually not used, or they were left quickly for another option or replaced with working in the same firm without any intermediaries. In some areas, it is difficult to find any work, and the interviewees were forced to remain working part-time with short-term contracts without social security provided by their employer. In areas with more options, the unpleasant working experiences remained short. All the interviewees started with entry-level jobs where their former education and work experience mattered little or were irrelevant. The main barrier to obtaining a better job is not knowing the Estonian language.

**Working Conditions.** Most companies paid slightly more than the required minimum wage per hour. In supermarket chains, the labour shortage is significant, and flexibility in shifts, even in case of medical problems, may not be possible because there are no replacements. Labour shortages in

retail also caused employees to cover for sick colleagues and constantly work with higher intensity than required according to the contract. In addition, for several interviewees, the job was physically demanding, e.g. due to standing or lifting heavy loads, leading to health issues. The monotony of repetitive tasks may also become a problem over time.

**Awareness of Rights and Representation.** In general, interviewees did not know where to turn in case of breach of contract or named labour inspectorate. Labour unions usually were not mentioned. Most migrants would first talk to their supervisor, and their relationships with managers were usually good. However, even those who know about Estonian legal bodies may avoid the administrative process and prefer to search for a new job, partly because the low-paid job does not seem to be worth fighting for.

**Temporary work agencies (TWA).** In both retail and food processing, to a certain extent (statistical data nonexistent), TWAs are used to employ migrants. In retail, it allows people to pass by the language criteria, and such migrants usually fill the shelves in supermarkets and do not interact with clients. In food processing, TWAs allow employers to avoid all the bureaucracy related to hiring new workers, especially migrants. The downside of TWAs is the unknown skills, fit, and expectations of employees sent by a TWA.

**Trade unions.** Only one trade union has actively tried to inform migrants in retail about its existence. Employees in food processing can join different industrial unions where food processing is not prominent among other industries. Paying lower wages to migrants compared to locals and offering them inconvenient schedules are the most frequent problems in the retail sector; to save on labour costs, overtime is avoided. In both sectors, unions have noticed migrants' fear of joining the union and their tendency to leave the union right after gaining all the necessary information. Locals also prefer changing jobs to trying to solve problems with their current employer. In some cases where trade unions are involved, and even if the dispute has been solved successfully, the employer may still find an excuse to fire the employee, resulting in negative opinions about the activities of the labour union.

**Workplace Relations and Career Outlook.** The most positive aspect of the job, emphasised by many workers, was good relations in the workplace. Hierarchies seemed to be based on the length of the tenure at the workplace. In retail, in a few cases, interviewees were soon offered a higher position, like shift supervisor, or they became responsible for teaching new employees. However, not all accepted the higher position because the slight pay increase was not worth the large increase in responsibility. Most interviewees do not see themselves reaching higher positions with their current employers. Career aspirations included having a job where it would be possible to use one's mental skills or education acquired or establish one's own business.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Language barriers, limited interaction with Estonians, and a mismatch between qualifications and job roles prevent many migrants from fully participating in Estonian society and moving beyond low-wage employment. Given that, the recommendation is to invest in comprehensive language and cultural immersion programmes guided by Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) principles, combining language training with civic, cultural, and professional education. These programmes should include the following:

- Integrated Estonian language training with real-life social and workplace contexts.

- Internships or mentoring schemes with reputable employers to improve career prospects and local networks.
- Targeted inclusion measures to promote regular interaction with Estonian society and reduce the risk of long-term segregation.
- Access to vocational and continuing education should be supported for those migrant workers who express interest, ensuring that language learning efforts open up further opportunities. Those who reach a functional level of Estonian should be encouraged and enabled to participate in formal training and qualification programmes, helping them move beyond entry-level jobs and realise their potential.

By addressing both immediate working conditions and long-term integration, Estonia can support a more inclusive labour market that benefits migrant workers and society as a whole.

