

Approaches towards the labour market integration of refugees in the EU

REPORT

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Abstract

This article reviews the current debate among social partners and governments about how to integrate asylum seekers into the EU's workforce. While employers claim that refugees could help to address skill shortages, unions are concerned about the consequences for the working conditions of both the refugees and lower-paid segments of the existing workforce.

Background

In recent months, intensive efforts have been made by the EU and its Member States to find solutions to migratory pressures caused by instability in countries close to the EU borders to the south and south-east. According to Frontex, the agency that manages Member States' cooperation on borders, more than a million people entered the EU in the ten months between January and October 2015. Many of them were asylum seekers trying to escape atrocities in their countries of origin.

EU Member States have affected to varying degrees. Some countries have mainly had to deal with organising the refugees' reception and onward transit while other countries have been in the position of final destination for refugees. In this context, some countries temporarily suspended the Dublin III Regulation (1 MB PDF) whereby asylum seekers have to apply for asylum in the first Member State they enter, hence making it possible to process asylum claims anywhere within the EU instead of sending asylum seekers back to their point of entry.

The debate about the relocation of asylum seekers remains heated. On 20 July 2015, EU interior ministers agreed to the relocation of 32,256 people as a first step. In September 2015, Justice and Home Affairs Ministers adopted a decision establishing provisional measures in the area of international protection for the benefit of Italy and Greece. This decision established a temporary and exceptional relocation mechanism, valid for two years, from Italy and Greece to other Member States. The Member States participating in the scheme will receive a lump sum of €6,000 for each relocated person. Denmark and the United Kingdom opted not to participate in this action. In the meantime, the EU and many of its Member States are intensifying efforts to establish an effective, humanitarian and safe European migration policy.

From a legal perspective, it is important to make a distinction between an asylum seeker and a refugee. An asylum seeker is a person who has applied for asylum under the 1951 Refugee Convention on the Status of Refugees on the grounds that they have a well-founded fear of persecution on account of their race, religion, nationality, political belief or membership of a particular social group if they return to their home country. This person remains an asylum seeker for as long as their application, or an appeal against refusal of the application, is pending. A refugee is an asylum seeker whose application has been successful.

The debate extends beyond issues such as relocation, access, quotas and how to organise the reception and influx of asylum seekers. There is already some evidence – both at European and national level – that actors are starting to think strategically about ways to facilitate both the social and economic integration of refugees. In October 2015, the European Economic and Social Committee organised a conference to debate the challenges in integrating refugees (2MB PDF), during which the key factor identified was legal access to the labour market. The European Commission is currently mapping the situation in the EU in relation to the implementation of Directive 2011/95, Article 26 on access to employment, and Directive 2013/33 setting out standards for the reception of asylum seekers (this came into force in July 2015). There is some evidence that various labour market actors in a number of Member States are also discussing at national level how best to implement initiatives and regulatory changes to facilitate the labour market integration of refugees and asylum seekers.

This article is largely based on contributions from Eurofound's network of European correspondents reporting for EurWORK.