

Encouraging employment of third-country nationals through social dialogue

As labour shortages continue to strain national economies across Central and Eastern Europe, particularly in key sectors such as construction, healthcare, and manufacturing, the employment of third-country nationals (TCNs) has become an essential element of labour market strategy. To fill the gap in the needed workforce, third-country nationals are being hired in increasing numbers by companies that face numerous challenges in doing so.

Analysing and tackling those challenges and presenting measures and policy recommendations is the main goal of the Recruit4Tomorrow research project, co-funded by the European Union. The project is going to examine in detail the labour markets of the participating countries and look for areas where the needs of the labour markets can be met by employing nationals from third countries. The project will contribute to social dialogue in responding to changes in employment and work-related challenges and will strengthen the capacities of social partners for more effective cooperation in the design and implementation of policies in this area.

The Recruit4Tomorrow project is comprised of both employers' representatives as well as trade unions from 5 countries: Slovenia, Croatia, Bulgaria, Hungary and Slovakia. Recruit4Tomorrow is led by the Association of Employers of Slovenia (ZDS) in cooperation with project partners: Bulgarian Industrial Association (BIA), MGYOSZ - BusinessHungary (MGYOSZ), Association of Employers of Slovakia (RUZ), Association of Employers of Croatia (HUP), Svet gorenjskih sindikatov (SGS), Confederation of Independent Trade Unions in Bulgaria (CITUB), Hungarian Federation of Metalworkers (VASAS), Independent Christian Unions of Slovakia (NKOS), Croatian Oil Industry Union (SING), University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Public administration and Faculty of Economics as the main research partners and BUSINESSEUROPE as an associated partner.



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Co-funded by
the European Union

This leaflet was prepared in the framework of the Recruit4Tomorrow project which is co-funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Commission. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.



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REPUBLIC OF CROATIA
Office for Cooperation with NGOs

Project is co-financed by the Government Office for Cooperation with NGOs. The views expressed in this publication are the sole responsibility of Recruit4Tomorrow consortia and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the Government Office for Cooperation with NGOs.

Across Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Slovakia, and Slovenia, employers face a growing shortage of local labour, making the employment of third-country nationals (TCNs) not just a strategy, but a necessity. Recruit4Tomorrow focus groups revealed a strong desire for **simplified, transparent, and digitalised employment systems** that are both consistent and easy to follow. There are systemic inefficiencies - duplicated work permits, poor communication among institutions, and overburdened administrative services. Employers are calling for **fast-track procedures**, ideally handled online and supported by well-equipped embassies.

Common problems include **language barriers, cultural misalignment, and underrepresentation in integration programs**. Education and qualification recognition vary widely between countries, creating safety and efficiency issues. Stakeholders are pushing for **EU-wide standards** to improve consistency. Overall, there's an urgent need to **reframe public narratives** about TCNs, emphasising their contributions to business growth and workforce sustainability.



Labour Market Situation

FOREIGN WORKFORCE IN FOCUS – Insights across 5 EU countries from focus groups



Role of Social Dialogue

To build fairer systems, focus group participants emphasised the need to strengthen national and sectoral dialogue frameworks. The need for consistent rights and social dialogue is emphasised in all countries, seeing trade unions playing an active role in advocating for equal rights for all workers and integrating unions more deeply in strategy development for TCN labour inclusion.

The level of engagement from trade unions and employers varies across participating countries. In Hungary and Bulgaria, unions are **proactively supporting TCNs**, participating in dialogue, and even organising informational campaigns. In contrast, unions in Slovakia and Slovenia show limited involvement and influence. Croatia's unions are moderately engaged, more so in policy design than in daily practice, and appear open to expanding their role as foreign labour numbers grow.

A shared challenge is that many TCNs **do not join trade unions**, often due to short-term contracts, lack of awareness, or cultural unfamiliarity with union structures. This limits their access to support and advocacy.

Effective employment of third-country nationals requires more than job placements - it demands structured **integration and assimilation strategies** that promote long-term inclusion in society. Across all five countries, stakeholders voiced concern over **fragmented responsibility** between employers and the state. A key finding: both must collaborate closely to ensure that onboarding, orientation, and basic services (like housing and language learning) are in place. Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), in particular, often lack the resources for structured onboarding and thus may encounter more significant challenges in this regard. As some groups may be self-sufficient and operate as relatively closed communities, actionable steps are essential to ensure their assimilation and integration into society.

Ultimately, **shared, actionable strategies** are needed; ones that balance employment goals with a commitment to social cohesion and mutual respect.



Assimilation and Integration