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EU labour migration during the crisis – does increased labour mobility contribute to better labour allocation?

Introduction

Freedom of movement for persons and workers is undoubtedly one of the core values and main building blocks of the European Union. This paper examines a number of its aspects that have important political, institutional relevance for the European Union and its future.

The accession to the EU of eight central and eastern European countries (EU8)[2] in May 2004, and the subsequent accession of Romania and Bulgaria in January 2007 (EU2), marked –– an important step in the history of European integration, but also posed new challenges. A significant consequence was the extension of the free movement of capital, goods, services and people to Central and Eastern Europe. However, given the very wide differences in, for example, wages, there were fears in western Europe of a massive influx of workers from the new member states with expected negative impacts on the receiving countries' labour markets and welfare systems. As a result, all but three countries (the United Kingdom, Ireland and Sweden) made use of transitional measures in 2004 restricting – to varying degrees – the right to work for EU8 citizens in EU15 countries for a period of up to seven years. The continued and prolonged crisis that is in its sixth year has become a major test not only for the labour markets of individual member states but of the institution of free movement itself.

Post-2004 labour mobility constitutes a historically new phenomenon in a number of respects, exhibiting characteristics that distinguish it from previous forms of mobility resulting from earlier EU enlargements. The coexistence of different forms of cross-border labour mobility that include commuting, short-term, circular and more permanent migration, but also 'functional equivalents' as (bogus) self- employment in the framework of free movement of services and posted work play an important role. An additional new feature is that recent EU10 migrants tend to have a rather high educational profile both in absolute terms and also in comparison with nationals in the receiving countries.

The expectation that labour mobility can deliver a major contribution to a better functioning of European labour markets was clearly stated in EU documents as e.g. 'The European Job Mobility Action Plan' (EU COM, 2010). According to the 2011 report on Employment and Social Developments, the Commission stresses that intra-EU mobility can raise the overall EU GDP if it

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[2] Cyprus and Malta also joined the EU in May 2004, but given their small impact when we use EU10 we refer to both the Central and Eastern European countries (EU8) and Bulgaria and Romania (EU2).

improves labour allocation, through a better match of workers' skills and job vacancies, as a recent report of the European Commission states (EU COM, 2011). Is this indeed the case? Does evidence on cross border labour mobility after the 2004 and 2007 enlargement rounds support this positive expectation?

This article addresses a range of questions in an effort to characterize trends in intra-EU cross-border labour mobility in recent years. It builds on empirical evidence from a recent edited volume[3] by the authors that focusses on the qualitative and quantitative dimension of intra-EU labour mobility in context of economic crisis and labour market pressures with a special focus on skills-occupation mismatch, migration patterns as well as duration of stay and return. The second aspect this article touches upon is linked to a current debate on the political agenda: is there a negative effect of increasing labour mobility on welfare states, are there indeed signs of "welfare driven mobility" patterns or is this just a perception?

In the first section, we use data from the European Labour Force Survey to show European trends in cross-border labour mobility during the crisis, taking account also of the labour market outcomes for migrant and local workers. In a further step, we assess the skills-occupation mismatch reviewing the existing evidence and presenting additional evidence from, in particular, Italy and the UK. Indeed, it is often argued that migrant workers can compensate for skills shortages in the receiving labour markets - the question, in how far they can use their respective skills is less often addressed, however. The article concludes with an evaluation of the costs and benefits of intra-EU cross-border labour mobility with regard to sending and receiving countries including also potential effects on welfare systems.

1. Main trends of intra-EU labour mobility with special attention to the period of the crisis[4]

Although intra-EU mobility is still relatively low in terms of the share of the non-national EU population in individual member states from a sending country perspective the magnitude of outward migration has reached high levels already, with around 5 per cent of the Baltic labour force in the United Kingdom (Dølvik and Eldring 2008) and even higher rates for outward migration for Romania (Ambrosini et al. 2011).

Severe recessions have historically had a negative impact on net migration flows, and particularly labour migration flows; on the other hand, they have not usually affected long-term migration trends (OECD 2009: 63). Already in 2009, the European Integration Consortium (2009: 53) suggested that the current financial crisis may reduce short-term migration substantially as migration is largely determined by employment opportunities in destination countries and foreign workers are disproportionally affected by dismissals in an economic downturn. This was based on the view, which was in line with our findings in Galgóczi, Leschke and Watt (2009), that labour demand in the destination countries plays the predominant role as a driver (see also OECD

[3] Galgóczi, B. / J. Leschke / A. Watt (eds.) (2012) Migration and Labour Markets in Troubled Times: Skills Mismatch, Return Migration and Policy Responses, Aldershot: Ashgate.

[4] Throughout the statistical analysis we define the migration status via the nationality of the migrant worker.

2012). Simulations by Ahearne et al. (2009: 34–39) focus on the labour market situation in *sending* countries, as a push factor. Overall, they find that the effects of the crisis on net migration are relatively small, while pointing to some important country-specific differences. Labour migration within the EU appeared to be particularly sensitive to economic changes whereas family and humanitarian immigration was less sensitive to economic conditions (OECD 2012).

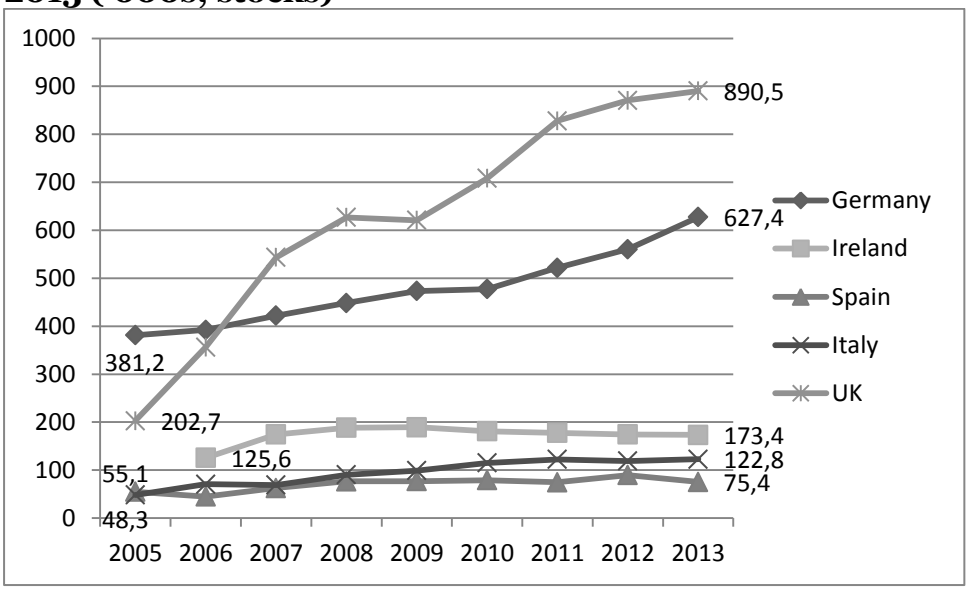
Another important aspect is that immigrant labour is particularly vulnerable to economic shocks. Migrant workers are usually concentrated in sectors such as manufacturing, construction, hotels and restaurants which are more sensitive to business cycle fluctuation, and they often have less secure contractual arrangements; migrant workers are often overrepresented in temporary (fixed-term) employment which was hard hit particularly in the first phase of the crisis. They have on average lower job tenure and may be subject to discrimination in hiring and lay-offs (on these issues compare OECD 2009: 19–25; OECD 2013 chapter 4). The following section uses data from the European labour force survey to shed some light on recent trends in intra-EU labour mobility and the labour market impacts of the crisis.

The impact of the economic crisis on intra-EU labour mobility

Figure 1 illustrates the broad developments in East-West labour mobility since enlargement in 2004 and up to 2013. It shows an initial marked increase of the EU8 migrant population in the two receiving countries (United Kingdom and Ireland) that opened up their labour market from the beginning while offering, at the same time, a comparatively favourable labour market situation for the absorption of immigrant labour. The negative impact of the crisis on post-2008 labour migration from Central-Eastern European countries, however, is visible particularly in Ireland which was especially hard hit by the crisis. In the UK, EU8 population stocks flatten out between 2008 and 2009 but already pick up again from 2009 onwards.

At the same time, Germany – a traditional destination country for CEE migrants but which made use of transitional measures up until May 2011 – shows a steady but more moderate growth in its EU8 population up to 2010/2011 whereupon the stocks pick up markedly.

Figure 1: EU8 population in major EU15 receiving countries, 2005–2013 ('000s; stocks)



Source: European Labour Force Survey. Age: 15-64.

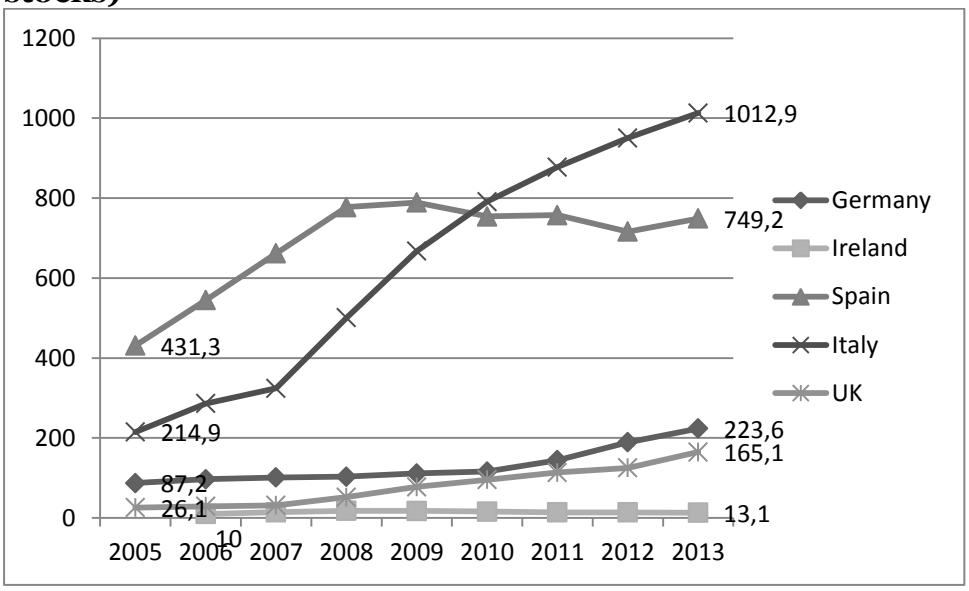
Against this background, it is important to note that, due to continuing EU10 migration inflow, the overall stock of EU10 population in EU15 countries has continued to grow during the crisis (except in Ireland, Spain and Greece, countries hard hit by the economic crisis) (figure 3). This has occurred in the face of declining overall employment (except in Germany and Poland) and seemingly contradicts both previous claims in the literature according to which deep recessions may be expected to result in a setback in migration flows as well as forecasts that this was what would indeed happen in the European post-crisis context.

Different migration dynamics from EU8 and EU2 countries can be explained by the fact that not only receiving countries but also sending countries differed markedly with regard to the impact of the crisis on their labour markets. Poland, the country with by far the largest migration flows in absolute terms, was doing comparatively well, being the only country not experiencing an output shock, whereas – in particular – the Baltic countries experienced huge increases in unemployment and declines in employment particularly during the initial phase of the crisis. Indeed, during the crisis temporary reductions for some EU8 and, most particularly, Polish migrants (with signs of return migration but also transmigration) were observed. Fihel and Anacka (in Galgoczi et al. 2012) show that highly skilled workers were not prone to move back to their home countries, a typical returnee profile being a middle-aged rural dweller with a low level of education. On the other hand, Hazans (in Galgoczi et al. 2012) finds, in line with the economic situation, that in Latvia and Estonia the role of push factors (especially unemployment but in Latvia also general dissatisfaction) increased during the crisis, showing also that low-skilled persons disproportionally affected by lay-offs became over-represented among emigrants.

As Figure 2 shows, there was also a growing intensity of labour flows from Bulgaria and Romania (EU2), particularly to Italy. In line with its affectedness by the crisis, the initial steep increase in population stocks in Spain flatten out and decrease after 2009. The UK has seen much smaller but rising stocks of

EU2 population such as Germany (particularly from 2010 onwards). The increase in EU2 flows has to be seen also in light of these countries' later accession and the enormous economic (e.g. wages) and social differences between Bulgaria and Romania and EU15 countries.

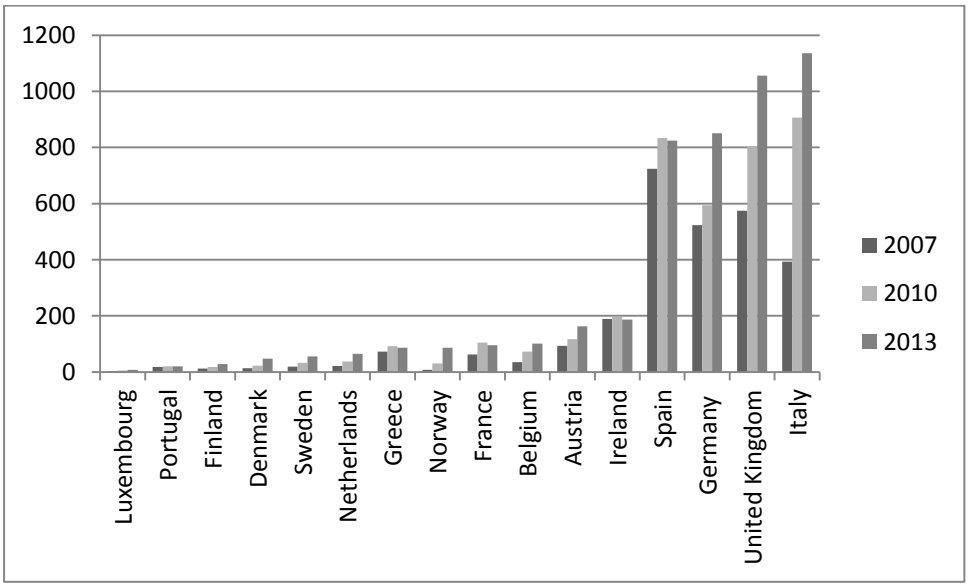
Figure 2: EU2 population in receiving countries, 2005–2013 ('000; stocks)



Source: European Labour Force Survey. Age: 15-64.

For the size of EU10 migration stock in the EU15 receiving countries, as well as its changes during the crisis, two factors were decisive: labour market access and the extent to which a receiving country was hit by the crisis (labour demand).

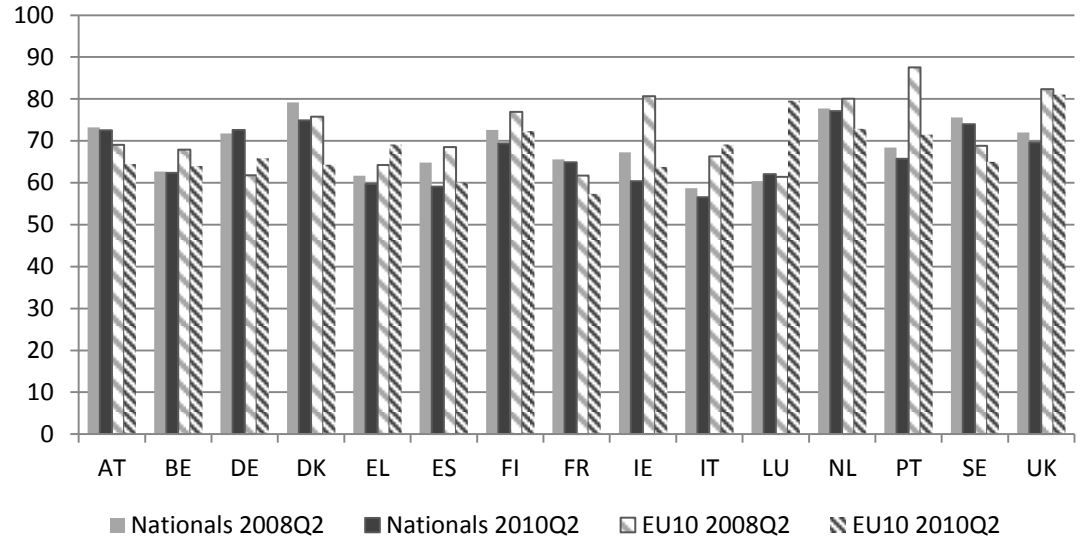
Figure 3: Impact of the crisis on stocks of EU10 nationals in EU15 countries, working age population ('000)



Source: European Labour Force Survey. Age: 15-64.

As regards the direct impact of the crisis on labour market outcomes, EU10 migrants were harder hit in the majority of EU15 countries and acted, at least partially, as labour market buffers. This can be illustrated by changes in employment rates for nationals and EU10 migrants (Figure 4). Both groups saw declines in employment rates in the majority of EU15 countries but the declining trend was stronger for EU10 migrants.

Figure 4: Development of employment rates of nationals and of EU10 citizens during the most intense phase of the crisis (in %)

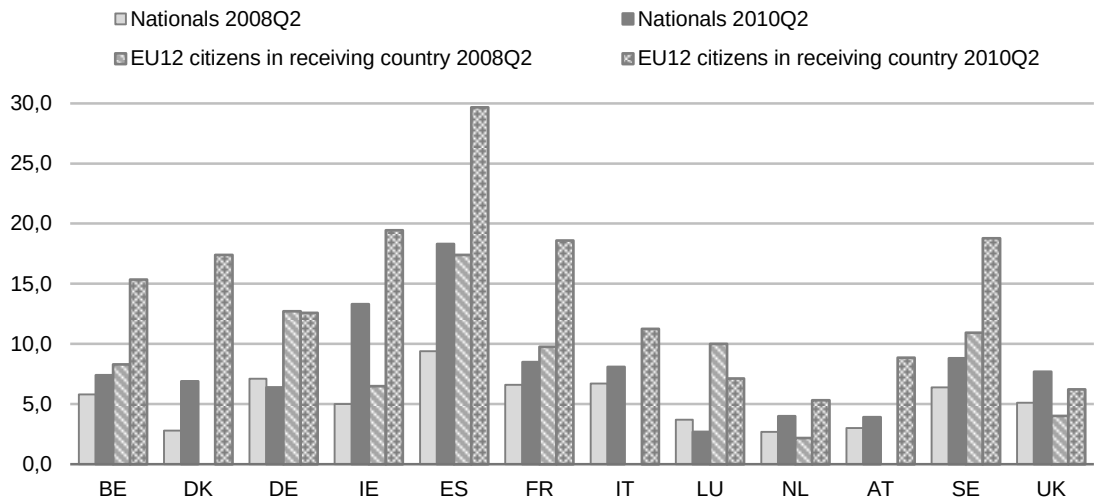


Source: European Labour Force Survey.

At the same time, unemployment increased in all countries except for Germany and Luxembourg, and EU10 migrants were again disproportionately affected in the majority of countries (figure 5). The most typical pattern indeed is larger increase of unemployment among migrant workers from a higher initial level. In principle, EU migrant workers have the same rights to unemployment benefits as nationals; in practice, however, they are often covered to a lower extent as not only are they less aware of their rights but they are also more often engaged in irregular and non-standard forms of employment with no or reduced eligibility to unemployment benefits (Leschke 2012).

The greater vulnerability of EU10 workers in the crisis also reflects the considerably higher concentration of such workers in sectors disproportionately affected by the slump in output (as e.g. construction).

Figure 5: Development of unemployment rates of nationals and of EU10 citizens during the most intense phase of the crisis (in %)



Source: European Labour Force Survey. Note: several countries with missing or incomplete data on EU10 nationals.

The trends described above suggest that both push and pull factors were subject to dynamic changes during the crisis period. For some sending countries, such as Romania and Latvia, push factors such as affectedness of local labour markets by the crisis and limited welfare benefits remained the dominant force of labour migration during the crisis. Complex combinations of both push and pull factors were also observed with onwards migration from formerly very attractive receiving countries that were hard hit by the crisis – such as Ireland – to destinations with better labour market prospects such as Norway.[5]

The main trends of intra-EU labour mobility during the crisis feature complex processes in a rapidly changing environment and can be summarized as follows. A continued growth of EU10 population in EU15 countries especially in Italy, the UK and Germany; not however in the countries heavily affected by the economic crisis – Ireland, Spain and more recently Greece. Changes in sending country composition such as return migration to Poland and partial substitution from other EU10 sending countries. While the number of employed nationals declined or remained stable in almost all receiving countries the number of EU10 employed grew in all countries except Spain, Ireland, Greece and Portugal (European Labour Force Survey, not shown). At the same time employment *rates* of EU10 migrants tended to decrease more and unemployment rates tended to increase more than those of nationals showing that employment of migrant workers reacted more sensitively to labour market shocks than domestic labour. To some degree migrant work has thus functioned as a labour market buffer in receiving countries. This latter trend will also have some significance in the debate on "benefit tourism" that we will address briefly in the last section.

[5] During the economic crisis Norway saw the EU8 population stocks increase from 9.1 in 2008 to 62.3 (in 1000) in 2012.

2. Labour allocation and skills mismatch: Brain Drain, Brain Gain and Brain Waste in post-accession intra-EU labour mobility

An important 'stylised fact' is that EU10 countries have significantly *higher* shares of medium and high skilled persons in their working age population than the EU15 countries. The share of persons having completed at least upper secondary education is almost 20 percentage points higher in the EU10 than in the EU15. Moreover, young migrants, who on average have higher education levels, have dominated post-accession cross-border movements. This implies that post-2004 migration is qualitatively different from previous migration waves (European Integration Consortium 2009).

In light of increasing human capital investment in the vast majority of EU10 countries, as evident for example in the increasing trend in enrolled tertiary education students, the brain drain hypothesis has been challenged for some NMS countries and it has been suggested that it should be interpreted rather in terms of a brain overflow: in other words, a lack of employment opportunities commensurate with the high skills that young people, in particular, have to offer (on this see, for example, Kaczmarczyk and Okólski 2008).

From a receiving country perspective the discussion is about brain gain versus brain waste. A brain gain occurs when migrant workers are recruited to fill gaps in the high skilled segment (for example, doctors) or in specific occupations experiencing shortages (for example, nurses or IT experts). In the context of East-West EU labour mobility specific programmes to attract high skilled labour and retain graduates from EU10 countries have been important in for example Germany and Austria, or more recently in the UK for workers from EU2 member states, as part of their transitional measures (OECD 2010: 42–58).

Over-qualification (sometimes termed 'brain waste') describes a situation in which migrant workers are employed in jobs that are substantially below their skill level. This was a key finding of our earlier study (Galgóczi, Leschke and Watt 2009). From a European perspective this risks misallocating scarce human capital and, on the individual level, challenges the hypothesis that returning migrant workers really have improved their human capital.

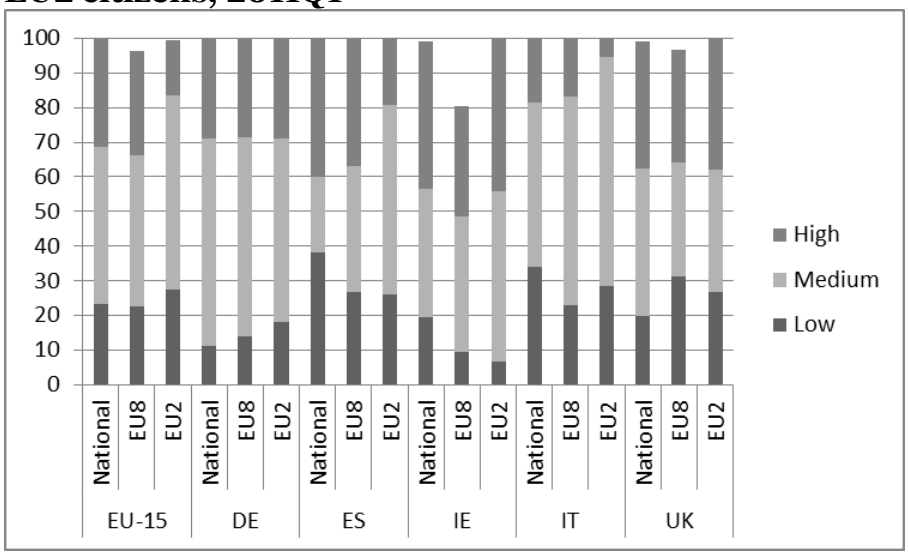
A conclusion from the existing literature is that in most cases neither the 'brain drain' nor the 'brain gain' will have a strong overall impact on labour markets and the economies of the sending and receiving countries. However, for small countries with large outflows and in certain sectors (for example, medical staff) it may be a cause for concern.

Evidence on skills-occupation mismatch

The skills composition of EU8 migrants displays significant differences in various receiving countries; this is also true for nationals. Using special extractions from the European Labour Force Survey for 2011, two important features can be identified: EU10 workers on EU15 aggregate level were considerably overrepresented in the medium-skilled category (58 per cent compared with 45 per cent for natives) and correspondingly underrepresented, to approximately equal extents, amongst the low and high-skill categories (Figure 6).

In 2008 the UK had a particularly high share of medium-skilled EU8 migrants (not shown). By 2011 however, the shares of both low- and high-skilled EU8 migrants increased. For Italy it is also true that medium-skilled EU10 migrants were overrepresented and this is especially true for EU2 migrants who make up the bulk of EU10 migration to Italy. What is different in the two receiving countries is that Italy has much lower shares of high-skilled EU10 migrants than the UK. Moreover, not just EU10 migrants, but also nationals in the UK have a considerably higher skills profile than in Italy. Since the majority of EU8 and EU2 immigrants in Italy have completed upper secondary education they are still relatively more educated than both nationals and non-EU immigrants (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Skill proportion in total employment: nationals, EU8 and EU2 citizens, 2011Q1



Source: European Labour Force Survey, special extractions.

Bettin, in her contribution to Galgóczi et al (2012; p 47-81), shows, on the basis of more detailed national labour force survey data, that the skills–occupation mismatch among migrant workers is substantial in both the United Kingdom and Italy, with disproportionate shares of migrant workers in both countries working in blue-collar jobs. While UK nationals and EU15 citizens are employed mainly as white-collar workers (56 per cent and 64 per cent, respectively, in 2010), the share of blue-collar workers is 82 per cent for EU8 and 79 per cent for EU2 nationals. Her data also reveal that 64% of EU8 workers with tertiary education had a blue collar job in the UK in 2010 (ibid.). Over-education thus seems to be far more widespread across EU8 and EU2 immigrants compared to the other groups. As regards Italy, while Italian nationals are almost equally distributed between white-collar and blue-collar jobs, the foreign-born population is fairly polarised. On the one hand, eight out of ten EU15 citizens are employed as white-collars, while the remaining groups are concentrated in low-skilled jobs.

The above findings are confirmed by a number of studies which show that post-2004 migrants from the new member states are employed well below their skill levels and thus that the returns to education are very low ('brain waste'). The European Integration Consortium (2009: 97–103) illustrates this for the United Kingdom, as do the chapters in Kahanec and Zimmermann

(2010) and Galgóczi, Leschke and Watt (2009) for a range of receiving countries. The analysis also shows that post-2004 migrants fare considerably worse than pre-2004 migrants from the NMS, both as concerns occupation–skills match and wages (see, for example, Drinkwater, Eade and Garapich 2009). A simple explanation might be the fact that the amount of time spent abroad (learning languages, acquiring contacts and so on) is a crucial factor in facilitating the transferability of skills. The 'brain waste' hypothesis is also confirmed by Dølvik and Eldring (2008: 76–77) for Baltic and Polish migrants in the Nordic countries.

Post-enlargement East-West labour mobility has thus not contributed to better human-capital allocation due to large scale skills-occupation mismatches affecting EU10 migrants on EU15 labour markets.[6] The decision to emigrate seems to be driven by absolute differences in wage levels across countries rather than by the relative returns to skills: migrants, particularly those who are planning to return at some point in time, are willing to take up jobs below their skill level as long as this allows them to accumulate savings or sent as remittances.

'Benefit tourism'

Recent political and media debates in a number of net recipient countries in intra-EU labour flows raised the issue of the access to social rights by citizens from other EU member states with residence in the given country. The term 'benefit tourism' was first used in the UK context (Bragg and Feldman 2011). In general, entitlements to welfare services (contribution or tax- based) across borders are frequently seen as a threat by national citizens with perceived consequences to their own social or employment security. It is also rather particular that the debate flared up in countries not affected severely by the crisis (e.g. the UK, Germany, Denmark and the Netherlands), whereas in receiving countries that were hit hard (Ireland, Spain or Italy) such debates did not make the headlines. Another interesting fact is that we see these debates emerging not only in countries with high and universal benefits (e.g. Denmark) but also in countries with comparatively low benefit generosity and a large degree of means-tested benefits. The institution of the freedom of labour mobility came under pressure in the last years and was fed mostly by populist nationalistic parties, although in certain cases it came close to the mainstream of the political spectrum (UK and Switzerland). Apart from political campaigns, crisis and austerity fatigue might have played a role. It is worth noting also that although the UK and Germany were not affected severely by the crisis municipalities in both countries are under heavy austerity pressure; at the same time migration population is unequally spread throughout the country, again with high pressure on selected areas and municipalities. These circumstances are likely to have played a role in the building-up of this perception in spite of the fact that - as we will show – there is no evidence to support those fears.

Looking for possible evidence, our data might also provide some orientation. Post enlargement intra-EU mobility being a rather recent phenomenon, duration of stay is rather short compared to previous migration waves and the

[6] This is also supported by the findings from the WageIndicator of Tijdens and Klaveren (in Galgoczi et al, 2012).

large share of mobile citizens are of working age and tend to be younger than both third country migrants and nationals. Employment rates of EU10 migrants tend to be higher than those of both nationals and third country migrants. Recent literature seems to support this, as Dustmann for the UK found that between 2007 and 2011, recent EEA immigrants made an annual average of 2,610 GBP per capita net contribution to UK public finances. At the same time, the annual net fiscal cost of UK natives amounted to about 1,900 GBP per capita (Dustmann et al, 2013). For Germany, Brücker found that EU10 migrants are less likely than nationals to take up unemployment and welfare benefit with a particularly lower take-up from tax financed welfare and social services: "about 48 percent of all Germans without a migration background receive some form of social transfers, and that only about 30 percent of A2 migrants receive any social transfer, including child allowances" (Brücker, 2013). Although these findings are preliminary, they give an indication on the main trends.

It also needs to be noted that some recent developments may have added to the perceived threat of EU10 migrants on welfare systems. Although, the evidence so far seems to indicate that EU8 and EU2 migrants have lower benefit take-ups than nationals or third country migrants, their benefit take-up had increased recently. This on the other hand is a plausible consequence of the fact that EU10 migrants were more affected by the crisis than nationals: although they tend to have higher employment rates in general, the decrease of their employment rates and the increase of their unemployment rates was in most countries higher during the crisis than that of nationals. Also with increasing duration of stay in the host country, they are likely to get better access to relevant information to learn about their rights to benefits (e.g. improved language skills, better networks, etc.). This does not mean however that the claim of 'welfare tourism' could be justified.

Freedom of movement of workers is a core value of the EU and it is not negotiable, as the recent example of Switzerland suggests. Although the movement of persons was initially limited to workers (and later to economically active people), the Maastricht Treaty granted all EU citizens the freedom to move and reside in any EU member state.

Conclusion

The recent and current manifestations of East-West post-enlargement migration within the EU, as described in this paper, represent an extremely differentiated process entailing numerous wide-ranging aspects with highly diverse implications. The overall process includes various forms of human and labour mobility that have taken place, and continue to do so, in a rapidly changing economic and regulatory environment. Since the 2004 and 2007 enlargement waves, push and pull factors affecting the behaviour and decisions of migrants have accordingly swung to and fro, subject to rapid and often contradictory forms of change and influence.

The economic and wage convergence between sending and receiving countries that was characteristic of the initial period after accession was called up short by the crisis. However, as regards the impact of the crisis, the dividing line has been not between sending and receiving countries but between one group of European countries that were particularly severely affected by the crisis

(especially the Baltic countries, Spain and Ireland) and another group of countries (for example, Germany and Poland) that were much less affected.
It is evident that intra-EU labour mobility is much more reactive to changes in the regulatory and macroeconomic environment than was the case with previous waves of migration. The shock of the crisis was not just a general test of labour markets throughout Europe but provided considerable insight into the relative position and role played by migrants on labour markets. Although both sending and receiving country labour markets have performed diversely, migrant workers were more severely affected because short-term migrant labour has acted as a buffer in most receiving countries.
A characteristic feature of EU10 migrants turns out to be over-education, attributable to a whole cluster of explanations. EU10 migrants characteristically have educational attainment higher than non-EU migrants and often also than the local population in the receiving countries. In the history of migration, this would appear to be a new phenomenon. The occupation–skills mismatch and thus the under-utilisation of human capital which has been highlighted above, points to one of the greatest challenges that intra-EU labour mobility is facing in recent years. This phenomenon can be seen also as a failure of migration-related policies to improve the efficiency of cross-border labour mobility.
In sum, post enlargement East-West labour mobility did not prove to be a lever of better labour allocation towards a single European labour market. The contribution of migrant labour to labour market flexibility proved to be controversial for both receiving country labour markets (as the 'benefit tourism' debate demonstrates) and the migrants themselves. These lessons are particularly important given that increased labour mobility within the EU and the Eurozone – including South-North migration flows – are more and more seen as an additional adjustment channel during crises.

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