



CEPS POLICY BRIEF

WHO WILL WORK FOR EUROPE? HOW EU ENLARGEMENT CAN HELP FILL EUROPE'S LABOUR SHORTAGES

Tinatin Akhvlediani

September 2026-06

SUMMARY

Europe's demographic decline is constraining economic growth. As the EU's working-age population shrinks and ageing accelerates, labour shortages are spreading across Member States. EU enlargement has been revived primarily by geopolitical momentum and security concerns, yet it could help expand the EU's labour and skills base at a time when labour is becoming increasingly scarce.

The scale of the next enlargement suggests that the adjustment should be manageable. The nine candidate countries would add around 65 million people to the EU, which is far fewer than the 107 million incorporated through enlargement rounds since 2004. Moreover, a substantial part of the migration adjustment has already taken place. Significant shares of Western Balkan populations currently live in the EU, and millions of Ukrainians have entered EU labour markets under temporary protection.

Candidate countries have valuable human capital. On average, workers from EU candidate countries are younger, more educated, skilled and economically integrated into EU labour markets. If successfully employed, they can help to address labour and skills shortages while contributing to the economy through taxes and social security payments.

Experience from previous expansions suggests that some additional outward mobility should be expected after accession, but that it need not result in permanent one-way migration. Economic convergence with the EU, higher productivity and better employment prospects at home can reduce incentives to leave, and support return and circular migration.

The central policy question should not be how to prevent labour mobility under the next EU enlargement, but how to manage it so that its benefits are maximised and its adjustment costs contained. This policy brief recommends placing productivity growth and job creation at the centre of the EU's pre-accession support. It should promote circular and return migration, and build a more integrated system for matching skills and promoting fair mobility. The EU should use transitional periods selectively and coordinate them at the EU level. Finally, it should provide targeted financial assistance if certain regions and cities face migration pressures after enlargement.

Managed in this way, labour mobility from the next wave of EU enlargement should be an economic dividend of expansion rather than an obstacle to it.



Co-funded by
the European Union

Tinatin Akhvlediani is Head of the EU Enlargement Programme at CEPS.

This policy brief is the second in a short series for the 'Enlargement without illusions: choices, costs and consequences for Europe's horizon' project, which has received support from the European Commission's Directorate-General for Enlargement and the Eastern Neighbourhood (DG ENEST). Views and opinions expressed are, however, those of the authors only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union.

CEPS Policy Briefs present concise, policy-oriented analyses of topical issues in European affairs. As an institution, CEPS takes no position on questions of European policy. Unless otherwise indicated, the views expressed are attributable only to the authors in a personal capacity and not to any institution with which they are associated.

INTRODUCTION

The EU faces a profound demographic challenge that is set to weigh increasingly on its economic growth, competitiveness and the sustainability of its welfare systems. By 2050, the working-age population is [projected](#) to decline in 22 of the EU's 27 Member States, while the share of people aged 85 and over is expected to more than double. This will place growing pressure on pensions, healthcare and social protection systems. If labour force participation remains unchanged, it will fall by [more than 20% by 2070](#), translating into [42.8 million](#) fewer workers across the EU. If left unaddressed, the demographic decline will become even more pronounced later this century, with the EU's working-age population potentially [shrinking by 54 million](#) by 2100.

As Mario Draghi's [competitiveness report](#) puts it, 'the EU is entering the first period in its recent history in which growth will not be supported by rising populations'. At the same time, sustaining economic growth is imperative for Europe to remain competitive and retain the economic heft needed to act effectively on the global stage.

Against this backdrop, the next wave of EU enlargement should be seen, among other things, as part of Europe's response to demographic decline and persistent labour shortages. By expanding the EU's labour and skills base, enlargement can help ease demographic constraints on growth while strengthening Europe's economic resilience and long-term competitiveness.

However, in public debates, the effects of it on labour migration, employment and wages seem to spark the most apprehension. The most recent [2025 Special Eurobarometer](#) on attitudes towards EU enlargement, covering 26 319 respondents across all 27 Member States, found that 56% of Europeans support further EU expansion. Yet 40% identified uncontrolled migration as a concern associated with enlargement, making it the most frequently cited one, while 27% worried about a negative impact on jobs or wages. These misgivings are particularly relevant given the large differences in wages, employment conditions and social protection that remain between the EU and candidate countries.

Concerns about wage competition and social dumping are especially prominent among [European trade unions](#). The [European Labour Authority](#) has warned about the vulnerabilities of mobile and displaced workers to undeclared work, unpaid wages, excessive working hours and abusive recruitment practices. Anxieties extend beyond labour markets, with the public and policymakers likely to worry about the additional pressure that increased mobility could place on housing, public services and social protection systems, particularly in regions already facing shortfalls.

This policy brief addresses these concerns by drawing on evidence from the literature and empirical estimates to assess the likely effects of the next EU enlargement on the demographics and the labour market of the EU. In doing so, it seeks to assess both sides of the equation: the extent to which enlargement could help to address Europe's demographic and labour shortages, and the conditions under which these gains can be achieved without exacerbating unease over wage competition and unemployment in existing EU Member States.

EVIDENCE FROM THE EU'S LAST ENLARGEMENT WAVES

Previous EU expansions were accompanied by many of the same fears now reflected in public attitudes towards further EU enlargement. The 2004 'big bang' enlargement, bringing 10 central and eastern European (CEE) countries into the EU, resulted in integrating [over 74 million](#) people into the bloc. The accession of Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia added a further 33 million or so, expanding the EU's total population by [around 107 million](#) since 2004 (see Table 1 in the next section).

Despite a significant influx of population and associated labour force of the acceding countries, the [evidence](#) from the post-2004 period suggests that these concerns were substantially overstated. Labour mobility rose following enlargement, but its scale was smaller than many pre-accession forecasts had predicted. Its overall effects on employment, wages and welfare systems in the existing Member States were limited and, in many respects, positive.

For a start, **the scale of post-enlargement migration was considerably smaller than anticipated.** [Pre-2004 forecasts](#) generally expected annual net migration of 300 000–400 000 people from the new Member States in the first years after the enlargement. In practice, annual flows from the eight CEE countries that joined in 2004 were closer to 200 000–250 000. By 2009, [around 1.8%](#) of the combined population of these eight countries had moved to the older Member States, increasing the latter's population as a whole by only around 0.4%. The experience points to a notable but manageable upswing in mobility rather than the large-scale labour movement feared before the big bang enlargement.

Also, **labour mobility did not spread evenly across the EU, but responded to transitional arrangements, economic opportunities and existing connections.** Transitional restrictions played an important role in shaping migration destinations. Germany and Austria had [received around 60%](#) of the migration from accession countries before 2004, but afterwards maintained restrictions on access to their labour markets during the transitional periods. Germany and Austria were overtaken by the UK and Ireland, which opened their labour markets immediately. [By 2007](#), workers from the 2004 accession

countries accounted for around 5% of Ireland's working-age population and 1.2% of the UK's. Sweden, by contrast, received comparatively few workers despite opening its labour market immediately. This suggests that formal access to labour markets was only one factor determining mobility: employment opportunities, wage differentials, diaspora networks, language and cultural ties, as well as transitional arrangements, all shaped migration patterns.

Fears of widespread job displacement and rising unemployment in the existing Member States were largely not borne out. [Studies estimate](#) that, by 2009, post-enlargement migration had increased unemployment in the older Member States by only 0.06 percentage points in the short term and 0.02 percentage points in the long term. The effect was somewhat larger for lower-skilled workers, but there was little evidence of marked displacement of local workers or of a lasting uptick in unemployment.

The impact on wages [was similarly modest](#): post-enlargement migration reduced average wages in the older Member States by around 0.1% in the short term, while these effects largely dissipated over time as investment and capital adjusted to the larger workforce. Where adjustment pressures emerged, they were predominantly local and sectoral rather than economy-wide. Workers from the new Member States were concentrated in certain sectors – notably agriculture, construction, manufacturing, hospitality and restaurants – and in specific urban areas, including London and Vienna. Still, even in these locations studies found only modest effects on wages and unemployment. The evidence points to limited and localised pressures rather than broad labour market disruption.

The fiscal impact of labour mobility was broadly positive for receiving countries. [The evidence](#) doesn't support the view that migrants from the new Member States placed a disproportionate burden on welfare systems. Their relatively high employment rates and labour force participation contributed to a positive overall fiscal balance, while their access to employment helped receiving countries fill labour shortages. The benefits were particularly visible in sectors and countries experiencing persistent shortages, including [the UK](#), which received a large share of post-2004 migrants.

Labour mobility, however, also exposed weaknesses in the enforcement of labour standards and created risks of employment below qualifications. Although migrants from the new Member States generally had education levels broadly comparable with those of workers in receiving countries, they were frequently employed below their qualifications. In the UK, for example, [44.6% of post-2004](#) migrants from the new Member States worked in elementary occupations. The risks of exploitation were [concentrated](#) in insecure and [weakly regulated](#) forms of employment, rather than being a general consequence of labour mobility itself.

Labour mobility was cyclical rather than permanent one-way migration. Mobility shot up rapidly in the first years following accession but had already begun to return towards pre-enlargement rates by 2009. In the UK, [net migration](#) from the 2004 accession countries fell from 87 000 in 2007 to 16 000 in 2009 as arrivals declined and departures increased. In Italy, migration from Romania was often temporary or circular, reflecting seasonal employment and geographical proximity. Return and circular mobility acted as an adjustment mechanism, allowing labour flows to respond to changing demand across the EU rather than resulting in permanent one-way migration.

As the new EU Member States grew economically, they began to experience their own demographic decline and labour shortages, becoming destinations for workers from outside the EU. Poland demonstrates this well. Right after EU accession the country experienced [higher emigration](#). But accelerated economic growth from EU accession soon [reduced unemployment](#) to among the lowest rates in the EU. Subsequently, Poland faced growing domestic labour shortages. These led the country to progressively open its labour market to non-EU workers, for instance from Ukraine and Belarus, by allowing them to work without a work permit for up to three months in selected sectors. Some of the Polish labour force returned after initial emigration as Poland's economy continued to grow.

The economic impact of labour movement following the 2004 enlargement was positive. The [benefits](#) mostly stemmed from the mobility of a skilled, relatively low-cost workforce that allowed diversification of production, which then translated into increased competitiveness and productivity gains. Estimates suggest that labour mobility following enlargement [increased GDP](#) in the enlarged EU by around 0.11% in the short term and 0.2% in the long term, equivalent to approximately EUR 24 billion.

Overall, the EU's experience of absorbing over 100 million people through enlargement suggests that the outcomes may be more nuanced than [expressed](#) in public opinion. While labour mobility generated adjustment pressures in some sectors and regions, it did not produce the large-scale job losses, wage suppression or welfare pressures that were widely anticipated. Instead, it expanded the labour supply of receiving economies, helped to address labour shortages and generated aggregate economic gains for both the acceding as well as the existing EU Member States.

LIKELY EFFECTS OF THE NEXT EU ENLARGEMENT

THE SCALE OF IT IS SMALLER THAN THE 2004 BIG BANG

Integrating the nine countries currently in the enlargement process, the six Western Balkan countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and the potential candidate Kosovo) and the Eastern Trio (Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia) would add around 65 million people to the EU¹.

This is substantially less than the approximately 107 million added through expansion since 2004. This difference matters. The EU has already demonstrated its capacity to integrate a considerably bigger population increase, including countries with wide income and productivity gaps vis-à-vis existing Member States.

As each candidate country undertakes reforms to meet the accession criteria at a different speed, it's highly unlikely that all candidate countries, with their combined 65 million people, would join the EU at the same time. Ukraine has the largest population among the candidate countries, but its total after the war with Russia ends is uncertain. Even for the most ambitious scenario of all candidate countries joining at once, the overall demographic scale of the next enlargement is still not unprecedented and, on its own, doesn't suggest an unmanageable labour market shock.

Table 1. Population of EU candidate countries (million) 1 January 2022

Country	Population
Albania	2.79
Bosnia and Herzegovina	3.46
Georgia	3.69
Kosovo	1.77
Moldova	2.57
Montenegro	0.62
North Macedonia	1.84
Serbia	6.80
Ukraine	41.00
Total: WB6 and ET3	64.54
CEE, Romania, Bulgaria and Croatia	107
European Union – 27 countries	446.00

Source: author's compilation based on data retrieved from [Eurostat](#).

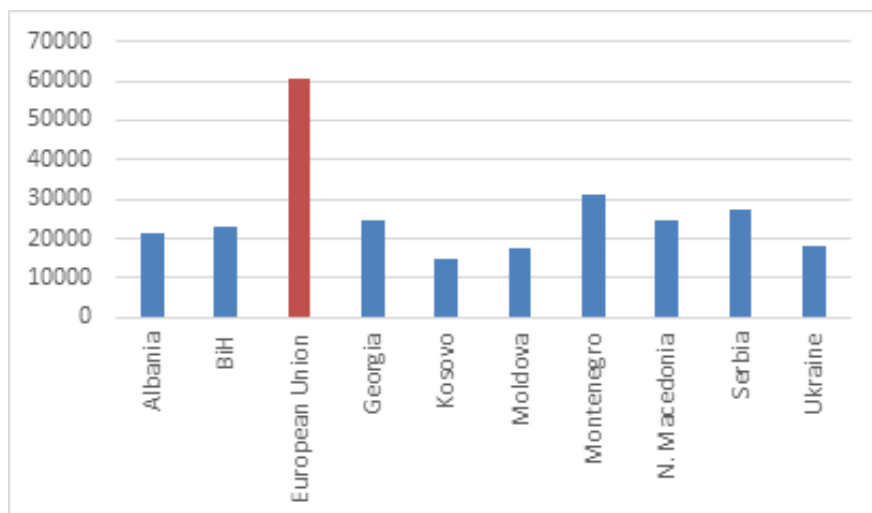
Note: WB6 = six Western Balkan countries; EN3 = Eastern Trio.

¹ The list of candidate countries also included Türkiye, but this paper accounts only for the WB6 and EN3 countries, as the accession talks with Türkiye have [been frozen](#) since 2018. The country remains more of a strategic partner – in a 'phased, proportionate, and reversible manner' – than a candidate country.

INCOME GAPS ARE LARGE, BUT NOT UNPRECEDENTED

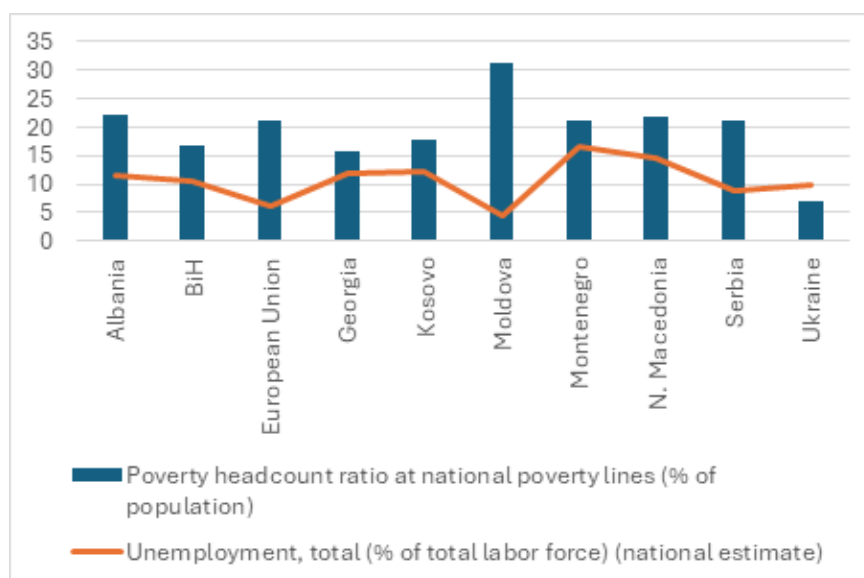
Today's candidate countries are significantly poorer than the EU average. Their GDP per capita in purchasing power parity (PPP) is, on average, less than half the EU level (see Figure 1). Unemployment and poverty rates are also generally higher, although these gaps have narrowed over the past decade (Figure 2).

Figure 1. GDP per capita, PPP (in USD), 2023



Source: author's compilation of data derived from the World Development Indicators, World Bank.

Figure 2. Poverty and unemployment (%), 2023



Sources: author's compilation of data derived from the World Development Indicators, World Bank. Data on the EU are from [Eurostat](#) (2024).

However, the differences are broadly comparable with the [economic gaps](#) observed when the CEE countries joined the EU from 2004 onwards. Experience of previous enlargement provides an important benchmark: sizeable income differences can generate substantial labour mobility, without making enlargement economically unmanageable for existing Member States. The crucial variable to explain this dynamic isn't just the income gap at the point of accession, but whether acceding countries are converging with existing EU Member States.

Accession can spur this process by increasing investment, improving employment opportunities, supporting skills accumulation and integrating firms more deeply into the single market. [Studies](#) show that raising productivity will be crucial for convergence as it can boost the gains of capital and labour investment. Higher productivity can support wages, firm growth and job creation, which can then strengthen labour force participation and reduce incentives to leave. [Recent estimates](#) find that productivity gains may more than offset the negative effects of outward migration, employment and output.

Yet, in the absence of productivity gains, lower migration costs may lead to a sharp increase in emigration from the acceding countries to the rest of the EU in search of better work opportunities and higher wages. In addition, if unemployment remains high and the economic outlook remains weak, emigration pressures will persist, and more so without the prospect of EU membership. Prolonged accession delays may themselves encourage outward migration if workers see better chances abroad and little likelihood of economic convergence at home.

To this end, stronger employment growth, higher wages and greater confidence in domestic economic conditions can reduce incentives to leave and increase them for migrants to return. In this sense, successful enlargement policy and successful migration management reinforce each other: the greater the economic convergence of candidate countries, the less long-term pressure there is for one-way migration.

MUCH OF THE POTENTIAL MIGRATION HAS ALREADY HAPPENED

Data show that an appreciable share of the migrant population of the candidate countries is already living in the EU. Mobility has been facilitated by long-standing economic and family ties with EU Member States and by visa-free travel regimes. Visa liberalisation doesn't itself provide a right to work in the EU, but it has made cross-border mobility easier and strengthened networks between candidate countries and EU labour markets. Some Member States have introduced targeted policies to allow labour mobility from selected candidate countries. For instance, [Poland has for the Eastern Trio](#) and Germany has for the [Western Balkans](#).

As Table 2 shows, around 18% of Kosovo’s population already lives in the EU, as does 14% of Albania’s and roughly 10% of the populations of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia. For most other candidate countries, the corresponding share is estimated at around 2–6%. Ukraine is an even clearer example of labour market integration preceding accession.

Table 2. Population of EU candidate countries living abroad (number and %)

Country	Estimated population living abroad, 2024	Estimated resident population, 2024	Estimated share living abroad (%), 2024	Estimated population living in the EU, 2025	Estimated share living in the EU (%), 2025
Albania	1 216 628	2 791 765	30.35	563 258	14.05
Bosnia and Herzegovina	1 608 324	3 164 253	33.70	459 706	9.63
Montenegro	90 678	638 479	12.44	35 599	4.88
North Macedonia	534 616	1 823 009	22.68	256 355	10.87
Serbia	963 307	6 736 216	12.51	459 270	5.96
Georgia	496 486	3 807 670	11.54	92 167	2.14
Moldova	864 257	3 034 961	22.16	182 119	4.67
Kosovo	800 000	1 602 515	33.30	419 301	17.45

Sources: The figures for the population living abroad come from the [UN DESA International Migrant Stock 2024 by country of origin](#). The resident population figures are derived from the [UN World Population Prospects 2024](#), using the medium projection for 1 July 2024. The estimates on Kosovo’s population living abroad come from a [2024 World Bank report](#) and the estimates on the resident population from [Kosovo’s 2024 census report](#). The figures on people living in the EU stem from [Eurostat](#).

Ukraine is a special case with millions of forced migrants due to the outbreak of full-scale war. As of 2026, [around 4.41](#) million people who fled from the war in Ukraine have received temporary protection from the EU. Among them, as shown in Table 3, the highest number are currently in Germany (1 286 230 people; 29.2% of the EU total), Poland (961 170; 21.8%) and Czechia (390 810; 8.9%). A substantial share of the Ukrainian workforce that might otherwise have moved only after EU accession is already living and working within the EU.

The EU's temporary protection isn't permanent; it currently [extends to March 2028](#). But even if the protection does not continue after 2028, Ukrainians who have become well integrated into the labour markets since 2022 are likely to remain in their host countries.

Table 3. Ukrainian population living abroad (total number)

Living abroad in 2020	Living in the country 2021	Living abroad in 2024	Living in the EU under temporary protection in 2026
4 353 031	44 298 640	9 769 216	4 410 000

Source: author's compilation of data derived from [UN DESA estimates](#) and [Eurostat](#).

To this end, EU accession should not be understood as opening the gates to an entirely new pool of workers. As data show, a notable share of the migrant population is already living in the EU, and much of the labour market adjustment has taken place. In this sense, EU accession of the candidate countries would further existing economic and labour market integration, which is already well advanced. Moreover, contrary to common fears, accession could actually reduce incentives to leave by improving economic prospects, employment opportunities and confidence in the future at home. From this viewpoint, EU enlargement could help more people stay in their countries rather than encourage them to move elsewhere.

ENLARGEMENT COULD EASE THE EU'S DEMOGRAPHIC CONSTRAINTS

Labour mobility from the next wave of EU enlargement should be considered from the perspective of the EU's demographic needs. EU enlargement could expand the labour pool available within the single market at a time when labour shortages are becoming a structural constraint on the [growth](#) of the EU's single market. Workers from candidate countries are already filling shortages in EU economies. Bringing these workers and their countries more fully into the single market could improve the allocation of labour across Europe rather than simply increasing labour immigration.

Most of the candidate countries currently have somewhat younger populations than the EU average (although countries such as Serbia and Ukraine face demographic pressures comparable with those of many EU members). This implies that workers moving from the acceding countries are likely to contribute their skills and pay taxes rather than add pressure to the budget and social programmes in the host countries.

That being stated, labour mobility from the next EU enlargement does not imply that mobility has no costs. Rapid emigration can worsen skill shortages and demographic decline in countries of origin, while concentrated inflows can cause adjustment headaches in particular sectors and regions of destination countries. Over time, the candidate countries will also face their own demographic concerns. As their working-age

populations grow older and shrink, they may increasingly need to attract workers from abroad, including from outside the EU – again mirroring Poland’s experience.

These effects require policy responses, including investment in skills, higher labour force participation, better matching of workers to vacancies and, where necessary, transitional arrangements for free movement. The central policy implication isn’t to prevent the labour mobility, but to make it work better.

HOW TO MANAGE LABOUR MIGRATION?

Managing labour mobility from future Member States will require a combination of temporary safeguards and longer-term labour market policies. As in previous enlargement rounds, transitional arrangements for the free movement of labour can help smooth the initial adjustment. However, [studies](#) suggest that lengthy restrictions may slow mobility only temporarily and do little to address the underlying drivers of emigration. They may also [redirect](#) workers towards other Member States or alternative job arrangements, including false self-employment, rather than prevent movement altogether.

A more targeted approach would be to use temporary safeguards in sectors or regions facing demonstrable adjustment pressures. The [literature](#) also points to the benefits of coordinating such measures at the EU level: purely national restrictions can divert migration flows to other Member States and generate unintended spillovers across the single market. A common framework would make both the pace and distribution of labour mobility easier to manage.

Better skills matching will be essential to ensure that mobility addresses genuine labour shortages rather than leading to widespread overqualification and skills waste. [Better coordination](#) could connect workers more directly with occupations experiencing such shortages, while pre-departure information, language training and organised mobility schemes could improve the labour market integration of workers after their arrival in the host EU Member States.

The circular migration that allows skills and professional experience to circulate between countries should be encouraged so that mobility generates benefits for countries of origin as well as destination countries. [Studies](#) indicate that helping returnees find employment, establish businesses and navigate administrative procedures could markedly facilitate temporary returns. Policies that smooth the way for entrepreneurship, access to finance and recognition of skills acquired abroad could help convert migration into a bigger development dividend.

Labour migration from the acceding countries is often perceived to put pressure on housing and public services. To address these concerns, targeted support may be needed in the cities and regions receiving the largest labour inflows. An [OECD–EU report](#) recommends allocating funding in line with the actual responsibilities borne by local authorities for housing, education, healthcare and labour market integration. The study also calls for flexible, multi-year financing and better coordination between local and national governments.

Ensuring fair working conditions will be equally important if greater mobility is to benefit both workers and destination economies. Mobile workers should be covered by equal treatment principles and effectively protected against underpayment, undeclared work and abusive employment arrangements. [Studies](#) also underline the importance of robust cross-border enforcement, including cooperation between labour inspectorates, joint inspections, information exchange and shared risk assessments. This should help to address the perceptions that labour mobility is creating unfair competition between domestic and mobile workers.

Public confidence in EU enlargement will also depend on how labour mobility is communicated and governed. [Research](#) suggests that governments should lead a balanced debate on enlargement, explaining its expected benefits, adjustment costs and available safeguards rather than allowing the discussion to be dominated by fears of migration and labour market competition. Echoing this message, a [European Commission communication](#) rightly calls for stronger trade unions and employer organisations in the candidate countries and for their closer involvement in labour market policymaking. Involving social partners on both sides of the enlargement process could increase public trust while giving workers and employers a direct role in shaping the rules governing mobility.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The debate on labour mobility from the next EU enlargement should start from Europe's own demographic reality. The EU is ageing, its working-age population is shrinking and labour shortages are becoming a structural constraint on growth. Enlargement won't solve these challenges on its own, but it can become part of the EU's response by expanding its labour, skills and economic base.

The evidence suggests that fears of an unmanageable post-accession migration are overstated. The next enlargement is smaller in demographic terms than previous rounds, and much of the migration from candidate countries has already taken place. Meanwhile, the EU's labour market continues to be characterised by labour scarcity instead of an excess of labour supply. Rather than establishing a new pattern of labour mobility, EU enlargement would reinforce an existing one.

What matters most is economic convergence of the acceding countries with existing EU Member States. If productivity, wages and job opportunities rise, the incentive for one-way outward migration will weaken and mobility can become more circular. Conversely, if economic convergence remains slow, emigration pressures are likely to persist regardless of formal restrictions. This makes productivity growth, job creation and stronger domestic labour markets central not only to enlargement policy, but also to labour migration management.

The central question isn't whether labour will move after enlargement, but whether that movement is managed in a way that supports growth, protects workers and limits adjustment pressures in both origin and destination countries. Restricting mobility can't substitute for more resilient labour markets, better skills matching or economic convergence across the enlarged EU. A more effective approach is to shape labour mobility so that workers move into productive employment, skills circulate rather than being permanently lost and the benefits of enlargement are shared across the EU.

Seen in this light, labour mobility should not be treated primarily as a cost of enlargement. Properly managed, it can become one of its economic dividends.

The recommendations below will help the EU to fill its labour shortages and maximise the benefits of mobility for acceding and existing members:

- 1) **Put productivity growth and job creation at the centre of the EU's pre-accession support.** Faster economic convergence with the EU and better job prospects at home are among the most effective ways to reduce excessive and persistent outward migration from candidate countries. EU funding and reform priorities should place greater emphasis on measures that raise productivity, support firm

growth and investment, and expand access to quality employment. These should include improving the business environment, vocational education and skills development. Supporting school-to-work transitions and increasing labour force participation, especially among women and young people, is essential, as is removing barriers preventing workers from moving into productive formal employment.

By strengthening domestic labour markets before accession, the EU can help ensure that future mobility is driven more by choice and opportunity than by weak economic prospects at home.

- 2) **Promote circular migration, and build a more integrated system for matching skills and promoting fair mobility.** Gradual integration before the EU accession, followed by labour mobility after it should enhance circular migration. This would enable workers to move temporarily, return home, transfer skills, invest savings and apply the experience they've acquired abroad. Candidate countries should put forward policies that support returnees, entrepreneurship and the recognition of skills gained in the EU. Such policies could turn mobility into a development benefit for candidate countries rather than resulting in a permanent outward migration of human capital.

The EU should also strengthen the infrastructure connecting workers' skills with labour shortages across the enlarged single market. This should include faster and more transparent recognition of qualifications, closer cooperation between public employment services in current and future Member States, and stronger linkages between vocational and higher education institutions and employers. Better information on vacancies and skill needs, combined with pre-departure information and language support, could help workers move into jobs that correspond to their qualifications rather than into positions below their skill level.

At the same time, mobility should be underpinned by effective enforcement of equal treatment rules, including equal pay and working conditions, more cross-border collaboration between labour inspectorates and measures against undeclared work and false self-employment. To achieve this, the European Labour Authority will be instrumental.

- 3) **Use transitional periods selectively and coordinate them at the EU level.** The transitional arrangements embedded in the Accession Treaties can be a useful temporary basis for monitoring and managing labour mobility following enlargement. They should, however, primarily target sectors or regions facing demonstrable adjustment pressures rather than apply as broad, economy-wide restrictions. To minimise distortions within the single market and avoid shifting

migration pressures from one Member State to another, the design and application of transitional measures should be coordinated at the EU level.

Restrictions at a broad, country level or unnecessarily long transitional periods are unlikely to prevent mobility. Instead, they may redirect workers towards less regulated forms of employment or towards Member States where labour demand and available skills are not well aligned. Transitional arrangements must be proportionate, time-limited and responsive to actual labour market conditions.

- 4) **Provide targeted financial support to regions facing the greatest pressure.** If post-enlargement mobility becomes concentrated in particular cities or regions, EU financial support should be directed towards the places experiencing the greatest adjustment pressure. Additional resources may be needed for housing, schools, healthcare, public transport and local labour market integration, especially where inflows are rapid relative to local administrative and service capacity.

While these and other public services are primarily the responsibility of Member States and their regional and local authorities, there is a clear precedent for the EU budget to help Member States absorb the effects of geographically concentrated migration, including through cohesion policy. Such support should be temporary and based on objective indicators of local pressure, rather than being distributed uniformly across Member States. Closer coordination between EU, national and local authorities would also be needed to ensure that resources reach municipalities quickly and correlate with their responsibilities.



CEPS

Place du Congres 1

B-1000 Brussels