

Tapping displaced talent: Policy options for EU complementary pathways

Policy Brief

May 2023

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With the financial assistance
of the European Union

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive summary	3
Introduction	4
A triple win: The case for complementary labour pathways	5
Small but growing: Current complementary labour pathways	6
Roadblocks: Challenges to expanding refugee labour mobility in Europe	7
Getting to work: Opportunities for expanding refugee labour mobility in Europe	9
Multiple pathways to complementary labour pathways: Policy options	11
Conclusion	15
Annex 1 – Selected existing labour channels in Austria, Czechia, Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden	16
Annex 2 – Other labour migration initiatives in Austria, Czechia, Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden	20

Acknowledgements

The authors thank Gizem Güzelant and Camilla Castelanelli for their research assistance, and Diana Stefanescu for her valuable comments. They also express their gratitude to the stakeholders who agreed to an interview for this project.

Katsiaficas, C., M. Wagner, and T.M. Matos, *Tapping displaced talent: Policy options for EU complementary pathways*. Brussels: ICMPD.

This document has been produced with the financial assistance of the European Union, contracted by ICMPD through the Migration Partnership Facility. The contents of this document are the sole responsibility of ICMPD and can under no circumstances be regarded as reflecting the position of the European Union.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- **An untapped pool of talent.** The talent that refugees possess is often overlooked in policy and public discussions. Skills-based policies such as complementary labour pathways, which facilitate refugee labour mobility, can bring tangible benefits for refugees, receiving employers and economies, and countries of first asylum.
- **An important role for the EU.** Momentum behind complementary labour pathways is growing globally, with Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom leading the way with innovative initiatives launched in the past five years. They remain small in scale, but are growing. EU Member States have yet to operationalise pilot initiatives, but a few are in the works.
- **Key obstacles to overcome.** While complementary labour pathways show considerable promise, displaced talent remains largely untapped. Key obstacles to overcome in the EU include policy silos and the need to coordinate among multiple actors; a lack of political will to bring in additional refugees; and tensions between supporting the hiring of refugees abroad and those already in country, especially amid a housing shortage. Other challenges to job matching are common to refugees and migrants more generally, such as those regarding local language proficiency and credential and skills recognition.
- **A good time to talk about refugee labour mobility.** Widespread and persistent labour shortages, set to increase in an aging Europe, point to an economic need to tap into global talent. Many employers are motivated to hire refugees, and civil society has taken an active role in supporting job matching. The European Commission is encouraging EU Member States to expand legal routes for people in need of protection, including channels for work, and 2023 is the European Year of Skills. As pilots continue to mature, it is a good time for their expansion and for the exploration of additional approaches.
- **Meeting complexity with flexibility.** Complementary labour pathways can take a variety of forms, meaning that they can be designed in line with Member State contexts and priorities, can engage a variety of actors, and can reach refugees with a range of profiles. Approaches to facilitating refugee labour mobility to the EU include those that make current labour pathways more accessible to refugees generally, as well as targeted initiatives for displaced talent in certain sectors or geographic locations.

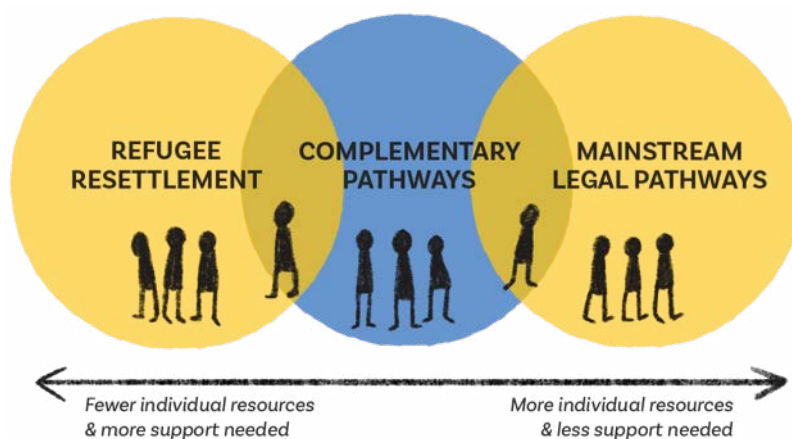
What are complementary pathways?

Complementary pathways to protection, for which there is no single definition, encompass different migration channels to third countries in Europe and elsewhere. These include opportunities to work, study, or reunite with family. They are termed 'complementary' because they are meant to come alongside (and in addition to) refugee resettlement. While complementary pathways target people in need of protection, in such cases their mobility is facilitated on the basis of their skills, educational aspirations, or family ties.

INTRODUCTION

The plight of refugees has become an increasingly visible and discussed topic in Europe. What is typically overlooked: Despite displacement, displaced persons have their individual ambitions, education, and skills that they can contribute – when given the chance. However, 74% of refugees reside in low- and middle-income countries,¹ and in many cases cannot put their skills to use.² Meanwhile, many EU Member States are experiencing widespread and persistent labour shortages, especially in software, health care, construction, and engineering.³ Furthermore, it is no secret that Europe is an aging continent and that demographic decline will require the recruitment of more international talent in the longer term.⁴ However, while there is considerable need for workers in Europe, most refugees cannot take up a job in another country because they do not fulfil all visa requirements or otherwise lack the networks, documents, or financial means necessary to make use of existing labour migration channels.

Resettlement, the traditional third-country durable solution to displacement, is meant for the most vulnerable refugees, who have the highest need for support. Other refugees are able to leverage their human, social, and financial capital to find their own way through existing migration channels.⁵ Complementary labour pathways can play an important role for those who fall between these two groups.⁶ Such pathways for this latter group can facilitate the matching of skills and labour needs and facilitate international mobility, enabling displaced persons to move and make use of their human and social capital. At the same time, employers and labour markets in Europe can access a source of largely untapped talent. Recognising the talent that displaced individuals possess – and enabling them to move for work, like so many other people already do – simply put, makes sense in many ways.



Adapted from Wagner, M. and C. Katsiaficas, *Networks and mobility: A case for complementary pathways*, Figure 2 p. 5

- 1 UNHCR, *Mid-Year Trends 2022*, 2022.
- 2 Ginn, T. et al., *2022 Global Refugee Work Rights Report*, Center for Global Development, 2022.
- 3 European Labour Authority, *EURES Report on labour shortages and surpluses 2022*, Fondazione Giacomo Brodolini, EURES, 2022.
- 4 Peri, G., 'Immigrant Swan Song', *Finance & Development*, International Monetary Fund, March 2020.
- 5 See OECD and UNHCR, *Safe Pathways for Refugees II*, 2021.
- 6 Wagner, M. and C. Katsiaficas, *Networks and mobility: A case for complementary pathways*, Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies, TRAFIG policy brief no. 3, June 2021.

To support the understanding and implementation of complementary labour pathways in Europe, this brief shares policy options identified as part of the EU-funded and ICMPD-implemented project “Making refugee talent visible and accessible to EU labour markets – tapping into the potential of skills-based complementary pathways”, financed through the Migration Partnership Facility. For this project, alongside desk research, ICMPD conducted dozens of interviews with relevant stakeholders. These stakeholders included representatives from national and local government agencies, the private sector, employer associations, NGOs, and academics, with a focus on five EU Member States in particular: Austria, Czechia, Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden. These states were selected with a view to identifying challenges and opportunities in EU Member States with diverse political, demographic, and migration contexts.

A TRIPLE WIN: THE CASE FOR COMPLEMENTARY LABOUR PATHWAYS

Complementary labour pathways offer humanitarian, economic, and pragmatic arguments: They enable displaced persons to utilise their human capital to forge a sustainable future; they provide employers and economies in receiving countries with needed talent; and they help reduce pressure on major refugee-hosting countries while demonstrating solidarity – a ‘triple win’. Given widespread and long-term labour shortages, with vacancies in nearly all industries and at various skill levels,⁷ as well as high and growing levels of displacement,⁸ it is more important than ever to think creatively. Expanding complementary labour pathways is a way for EU Member States to provide pathways to sustainable futures beyond resettlement – and may be more feasible than increasing resettlement quotas in the current political and economic landscape.



7 Author interviews with private sector stakeholders, academics, and civil society representatives in Austria, Czechia, Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden.

8 UNHCR, *Global Trends Report 2021*, 2022.

That refugees would move in accordance with their skills is not without precedent: While complementary labour pathways for refugees are often portrayed as a new approach, economic reasons were an important – and little hidden – motivation for engaging in the resettlement of ‘displaced persons’ after World War II. They also were an important criterion for selecting persons to be resettled, especially in the first years after World War II.⁹

SMALL BUT GROWING: CURRENT COMPLEMENTARY LABOUR PATHWAYS

Despite their considerable promise, complementary labour pathways remain small in scale – but there is growing momentum, with [Canada](#), Australia, and the [United Kingdom](#) all launching (and subsequently expanding) pilots in the past five years, in addition to pilots currently in the making in EU Member States.¹⁰ These relatively recent developments reflect growing support for refugee labour mobility as a way of enhancing international responses to rising and often protracted global displacement.

Although complementary pathways are less discussed in the EU, they have started gaining traction, especially as part of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum (specifically the [Recommendation](#) on legal pathways to protection in the EU: promoting resettlement, humanitarian admission and other complementary pathways, recommendation 32), the November 2022 European Commission [High-level Forum on legal pathways to protection](#), and the abovementioned pilots currently underway. Complementary labour pathways were also set out as a priority topic in the 2023 Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) [call for proposals](#).

As illustrated in an ICMPD mapping of skills-based pathways for persons in need of protection,¹¹ the earliest initiatives have primarily targeted people in certain professions, mainly scholars, writers, and artists, with partners banding together to facilitate short-term placements, after which the individuals may remain at their host institution, find another opportunity in country (or a third country), or return. While the duration of stay allowed has been an issue central to complementary pathways (in general, and complementary labour pathways in particular), due to concerns over adequate protection and *non-refoulement*,¹² these initiatives may serve as a stepping stone to a more sustainable opportunity. Several such initiatives are currently operational in EU Member States, spearheaded by local governments, universities, arts institutions, and NGOs. A number of

9 For a case study on the use of resettlement to recruit domestic workers, see Harzig, C., ‘MacNamara’s DP Domestic: Immigration Policy Makers Negotiate Class, Race and Gender in the Aftermath of World War II,’ *Social Politics*, Vol. 10, No. 1, 2003, p. 23-49.

10 For the latter, see the [Displaced Talent for Europe](#) and [EU-Passworld](#) projects.

11 ICMPD, [Mapping of complementary labour and education pathways for people in need of protection](#), updated March 2023.

12 See, for example, UNHCR, [UNHCR Complementary Pathways for Admission of Refugees to Third Countries: Key Considerations](#), 2019, p. 12; Wood, T., ‘The role of ‘complementary pathways’ in refugee protection’, 2020, p. 27; Vankova, Z., ‘Work-Based Pathways to Refugee Protection under EU Law: Pie in the Sky?’ *European Journal of Migration and Law*, Vol. 24, No. 1, pp. 86-111, 2022, p. 93.

more recent initiatives have taken the form of pilots launched by national governments and NGO partners, particularly Talent Beyond Boundaries. These centre on the idea of job matching and aim to provide a long-term solution: Canada's pilot offers permanent residency upon arrival, Australia's pilot gives employers the option of sponsoring workers on a permanent basis, and the UK's scheme grants five-year Skilled Worker Visas, with visa holders then entitled to Indefinite Leave to Remain.

Meanwhile, the 2021 Taliban takeover of Afghanistan and the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine have both served as impetuses for expanding the protection toolbox. Responses globally have included evacuation, parole, sponsorship, temporary protection, and a variety of other initiatives aimed at swiftly admitting persons in need of protection, along with granting the right to work.¹³ These initiatives thus differ from the complementary labour pathways implemented thus far (in which a job offer provides the basis for visa issuance). Nevertheless, they reflect key elements of complementary pathways: They are a show of solidarity, allowing people in need of protection to move beyond neighbouring countries, while keeping them out of the traditional asylum or resettlement lane, and they complement – and come in addition to – resettlement. These cases thus provide further illustration of how protection and labour mobility can be implemented in tandem, even on a large scale.

While complementary labour pathways show considerable promise, displaced talent remains largely untapped, especially in EU workplaces and labour markets. The following sections examine the obstacles to and opportunities for expanding these pathways in Member States, as identified primarily through engagement with stakeholders from government, the private sector, civil society, and academia.

ROADBLOCKS: CHALLENGES TO EXPANDING REFUGEE LABOUR MOBILITY IN EUROPE

Several of the challenges to implementing complementary labour pathways in the EU overlap with difficulties and barriers experienced by refugees and migrants already in the country. These include a lack of local language proficiency, a lengthy process for the recognition of foreign credentials, a lack of recent work experience, discrimination (particularly towards people of Middle Eastern or North African origin), and risk of labour exploitation. Other foreseen challenges specifically related to complementary labour pathways include:

- **Tensions between different populations and goals.** Concerns expressed during interviews conducted during the ICMPD project included tensions in the concept of complementary labour pathways, which combine humanitarian and economic goals – more specifically, concern that humanitarian protections might be at risk by prioritising the skills and qualifications of refugees and using economic pathways to facilitate their mobility.¹⁴ Another primary concern was that the

¹³ ICMPD, *Mapping of complementary labour and education pathways for people in need of protection*.

¹⁴ Author interviews with academic and civil society stakeholders in Austria and Sweden.

international recruitment of refugees might shift attention away from refugees already present in EU Member States who are facing challenges integrating into the labour market.¹⁵ Concern was also expressed over whether implementation of complementary labour pathways could lead countries to reduce their participation in resettlement schemes, allowing them to argue that they are already fulfilling their humanitarian obligations, while receiving refugees who are experts in high-demand fields rather than those deemed most at risk¹⁶ ('cherry picking'¹⁷). Additionally, a widespread shortage of affordable housing prompted concerns that the arrival of additional refugees may exacerbate tensions.¹⁸

- **Public opinion and political will.** Migration remains a highly polarised issue in many places. A frequently negative dominant narrative on migration and asylum, accompanied by the rise of far-right political movements in many EU Member States, mean that support from national governments and the public for new refugee migration pathways might be low. In some EU countries, there is little appetite for increasing the number of migrant arrivals generally, especially beyond those deemed highly skilled.¹⁹
- **High numbers of recent arrivals from Ukraine.** The large number of individuals seeking refuge in Member States, particularly since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, has stretched reception and integration capacities in many parts of the EU. It could potentially lead to solidarity fatigue or reduced support from national governments²⁰ and the public for new refugee pathways.
- **Stakeholder coordination and leadership.** As complementary labour pathways span different policy fields, including humanitarian and economic migration channels, development, integration, labour, and education, it is imperative to engage a variety of stakeholders to bridge policy silos.²¹ Partners to get on board will come from multiple government institutions, the private sector, and civil society, and coordinating such diverse actors and their possibly conflicting interests is a complex task. However, leadership remains important to moving forward, raising the question as to which actor(s) should take the lead – and, within government, where the responsible person is housed institutionally. With no current mandate, many feel uncomfortable taking the lead on complementary labour pathways. A specialised unit, operating with a specific mandate but working across related policy areas (e.g., legal migration, asylum, and employment), would send a strong signal to move forward on policies for refugee labour mobility as a valuable future-oriented migration policy. In addition, it would meet outdated migration concepts with a new and fresh approach.
- **High levels of investment needed.** New pilots and policies typically require an up-front investment, and complementary labour pathways can involve high implementation costs, especially early on, in terms of both finances and personnel.²²

15 Author interviews with various stakeholders in Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden.

16 Author interview with a civil society representative in Germany.

17 Crisp, J., 'Unpicking the notion of 'safe and legal' routes' in *Mixed Migration Review 2022*, Horwood, C., Frouws, B. and R. Forin (eds.), Mixed Migration Centre, 2022.

18 Author interviews with academic, civil society, and private sector representatives in the Netherlands.

19 Author interviews with various stakeholders in Austria, Czechia, the Netherlands, and Sweden.

20 Author interviews with private sector representatives in Austria and Czechia.

21 Wagner, M., C. Katsiaficas, and C. Fogli, *Strengthening Policy Responses to Protracted Displacement: TRAFIG policy handbook*, TRAFIG, 2022.

22 Author interviews with academic stakeholders in Austria and Sweden and a one-stop-shop representative in the Netherlands.

- **Limitations to job matching.** While labour shortages were reported in nearly all sectors and at all skill levels, most migration pathways in place target higher skilled individuals. Additionally, there may exist a mismatch between localities within EU countries to which people wish to migrate (especially larger cities) and places with high labour needs (smaller cities and towns).²³ Here, both attraction and retention represent challenges for employers looking to recruit internationally.

GETTING TO WORK: OPPORTUNITIES FOR EXPANDING REFUGEE LABOUR MOBILITY IN EUROPE

Despite these challenges to rolling out complementary labour pathways in the EU, economic and demographic trends, considerable experience with refugee labour market integration, and the desire of different actors to contribute to solutions represent opportunities for their implementation.

- **Widespread labour shortages.** Given high labour shortages reported across different sectors and skill levels (and their expected future intensification due to demographic decline), immigration is seen as a tool to recruit needed workers – and a key one, in many cases. High labour needs are also spurring increased interest in creative strategies and thus provide an opportunity to further more serious discussions on complementary labour pathways.²⁴ Positioning themselves as stronger contenders in the so-called ‘global race for talent’ will become increasingly urgent for EU Member States (and their constitutive regions, cities, towns, and even rural municipalities) – and refugees represent a large pool of largely untapped talent.
- **Strong employer motivation.** Employers are a fundamental stakeholder in the development of complementary labour pathways, and many are interested in hiring refugees already in the country or elsewhere. The reasons for their motivations vary but are mainly related to high labour needs and social responsibility. Particularly pressing in light of current labour shortages, looking toward refugee labour mobility can enable employers to tap into a new pool of skilled and motivated workers who are eager to contribute. Additionally, hiring refugees and assisting them in relocating can demonstrate employers’ commitment to social responsibility and diversity initiatives, which can enhance their reputation and brand image.²⁵ There is thus considerable potential to develop employer-driven complementary pathways.
- **European Year of Skills.** The European Commission has designated 2023 as the ‘European Year of Skills’, reflecting an understanding that EU Member States need migration and other tools to maintain economic growth and innovation.²⁶ This occasion provides an opportunity to raise awareness of the skills and qualifications of refugees – including those who remain outside the EU in first countries of asylum. This can serve as a platform to develop actions related to

23 Author interview with an academic stakeholder in Austria.

24 Author interviews with stakeholders in Austria, Czechia, Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden.

25 Author interviews with private sector stakeholders in Czechia and Germany and civil society stakeholders in Germany and the Netherlands.

26 European Commission, ‘[Commission kick-starts work on the European Year of Skills](#),’ News, 12 October 2022.

validating the skills and competencies of displaced persons as well as enhancing them through apprenticeships, upskilling, and reskilling opportunities. It could also serve as an occasion to promote the labour mobility of refugees to help address the growing demand for workers and leverage this largely untapped talent pool.

- **A precedent of flexibility to meet labour shortages.** The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of migrant workers for receiving countries, especially their critical roles in maintaining basic services such as health care and food supply chains. As a result, some countries eased travel restrictions and credential requirements to meet their needs for essential workers during the pandemic. Fast tracks were also developed in response to the arrival of Ukrainian refugees, with some EU Member States implementing creative initiatives to enable newcomers to take up needed jobs.²⁷ Sweden is a pioneer in fast tracking the labour market integration of migrants into shortage professions, including social workers, preschool teachers, and health care professionals, first doing so in 2015.²⁸ Along similar lines, increased flexibility for refugees currently abroad under complementary labour pathways programmes could ease barriers while alleviating shortages.
- **Existing labour migration schemes.** All EU countries have labour migration channels in place, although their design (including scope and requirements) and the intensity with which they attempt to attract foreign workers varies widely. However, the labour migration pathways currently in place largely target highly skilled workers, despite a much broader need for labour prevailing, as seen during the COVID-19 pandemic. Stakeholder interviews also clearly reflected this phenomenon.²⁹ In this context, and given the urgency of the labour shortage being felt in many parts of Europe, established schemes could be built upon, or adjusted, to facilitate the recruitment of refugee talent.
- **Lessons from existing complementary labour pathways.** There are now a few pilots in place to facilitate refugee labour mobility, and more are in the works. As these programmes increase in number and mature in practice, there are important lessons learned that may apply to the EU context. Meanwhile, the rollout of pilots is underway in Belgium, Ireland, and Portugal, and can provide examples of what these schemes can look like in the EU context. Now is a good time to expand such schemes and explore additional approaches, so that more displaced people in first countries of asylum can access employment opportunities.

27 See *Creative approaches to boosting the employment of displaced Ukrainians*, ICMPD, forthcoming.

28 Westphal, H. and A-K. Gustafsson, 'Sweden: Fast-track initiative to help asylum-seekers enter labour market,' Eurofound, 2016.

29 Author interviews with various stakeholders in Austria, Czechia, Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden.

MULTIPLE PATHWAYS TO COMPLEMENTARY LABOUR PATHWAYS: POLICY OPTIONS

Just as there is no single definition of ‘complementary pathways’, complementary labour pathways are not restricted to one approach – they can look different, which provides room for manoeuvre to develop an approach that fits local contexts and national priorities. This policy brief thus presents a range of policy options for expanding complementary labour pathways in the EU. These policy options are divided below into two main buckets, options that: 1) make current labour pathways more accessible to refugees generally or 2) represent targeted initiatives for displaced talent in certain sectors or geographic locations.

1. BOOSTING DISPLACED TALENT’S ACCESS TO MAINSTREAM LABOUR MIGRATION CHANNELS

Utilising existing labour migration channels (see Annex 1) will allow actors to proceed without waiting for policy changes, even if they are operating in an imperfect system. Potential options in this regard include:

- **Tapping into current complementary labour pathway pilots, including those with a sponsorship component. Current schemes³⁰** led by the Australian, British, and Canadian governments can serve as a model (or as inspiration) for countries looking to develop a pilot of their own. Launching pilots in additional EU Member States can show proof of concept to national stakeholders and build momentum toward expanding the number of places available and making the programmes permanent.
- **Incorporating humanitarian considerations into points-based immigration systems to help level the playing field for displaced talent.** These systems already take a variety of factors into account when determining which potential migrants can obtain a visa for a job or apprenticeship-based pathway. Awarding a certain number of points to persons in need of protection might make the difference in whether they are able to secure a work visa.
- **Providing targeted assistance to help displaced workers and European employers to use the EU Blue Card and national labour migration schemes.** For job candidates, awareness raising about opportunities and assistance with CV preparation and interviewing would help more candidates to find a job in Europe that would qualify them for a visa. Organisations such as [Talent Beyond Boundaries](#) are helping individuals to secure job offers with employers in other countries. Among employers, small- and medium-sized enterprises in particular would stand to benefit from support, as they typically lack a dedicated staff member tasked with navigating the intricacies of immigration processes (which are even more complex for displaced persons). An intermediary individual or organisation could raise awareness among and provide assistance to employers, and could build on existing initiatives such as the Danish Confederation of Industry’s

³⁰ For more on current schemes, see ICMPD, *Mapping of complementary labour and education pathways for people in need of protection*.

email and telephone advice hotline on hiring refugees³¹ or existing employer networks such as [Tent Partnership for Refugees](#) (operating internationally) and [Netzwerk Unternehmen integrieren Flüchtlinge](#) (operating in Germany).

Making better use of existing pathways

As existing pathways were not built with the situations of displaced persons in mind,³² there can be significant stumbling blocks to relocating refugees to take up a job.³³ In particular, these channels may not be accessible to refugees who do not fulfil all of the criteria (for instance, if they lack required documentation), as existing channels are often bureaucratic and inflexible and not necessarily aligned with actual employer needs. Thus, introducing a degree of flexibility into these pathways would further enhance access for displaced persons, as would strengthening infrastructure to support stakeholders in the process. Such activities could include:

- **Creating more flexibility for refugees (and/or migrants more broadly)**, for instance, with regard to requirements such as salary thresholds and labour market tests. Regarding skills recognition, a common challenge faced, tools such as the [European Qualification Passport for Refugees](#) are already used in several Member States to standardise the presentation of skills for refugees already in country and might also be used for refugees abroad.
- **Facilitating job matching** through a combination of databases and networks to help more displaced workers and European employers to connect. Talent Beyond Boundaries' [Talent Catalog](#) and an expanded [EU Talent Pool](#), for instance, could help more people to make a match.³⁴ Meanwhile, networks in countries of first asylum and destination would help individuals to be aware of these opportunities and make full use of them.
- **Supporting national actors in going global**, particularly refugee-serving NGOs and private sector actors, to boost job matching as well as vocational and language training activities aimed at refugees currently abroad. In Europe, civil society has long played an active and important role in welcoming refugees and supporting them in taking up employment, and employer networks have taken an increasingly active role. Many organisations now have considerable experience in labour market inclusion and other facets of integration, as well as strong connections with employers. They understand labour market needs and are involved in supporting refugee integration (which is important for both employee retention and protection-sensitive approaches). These actors may be interested in expanding their work internationally, supplementing their current work by adding the element of mobility, to support more refugees in finding a sustainable solution in Europe.³⁵

31 OECD and UNHCR, *Engaging with Employers in the Hiring of Refugees*, 2018, p. 29.

32 Talent Beyond Boundaries and Fragomen, *Global Refugee Labour Mobility Summit*, Amman, Jordan, 6-10 March 2023.

33 For more on visa barriers, see Fratzke, S. et al., *Refugee Resettlement and Complementary Pathways: Opportunities for Growth*, UNHCR and Migration Policy Institute Europe, 2021, p. 41-43.

34 Matos, M.T., M. Wagner, and C. Katsiaficas, 'Can the EU Talent Pool drive complementary pathways to the EU?', ICMPD, forthcoming.

35 Author interviews with NGO representatives in Austria, Czechia, Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden.

- **Working with one-stop-shops** in Member States to help with the navigation of migration-related bureaucracy and settlement support. The digital and physical co-location of key information and services for newcomers can simplify the process of moving and settling in, and several European cities have taken this approach as part of broader talent attraction and retention efforts, including the [Brno Expat Centre](#), [Holland Expat Center South](#), [International Citizen Hub Lund](#), Move to Gothenburg's [International House Gothenburg](#), [International Welcome Center North](#), and the Vienna Business Agency's [Business Immigration Office](#). Such actors could be valuable partners for complementary pathways stakeholders.

2. LAUNCHING TARGETED INITIATIVES FOR DISPLACED TALENT

Targeted initiatives offer an opportunity to intentionally reach displaced talent, whether based on a regulation, project, bilateral agreement, or other instrument. There are already several focused initiatives operating in EU Member States (see Annex 2); these could be expanded to reach refugees or used as inspiration for the creation of refugee-specific schemes. Such opportunities include:

- **Easing mobility for displaced workers with a job offer, taking inspiration from Germany's Western Balkans Regulation.**³⁶ This [Regulation](#) opened the German labour market to Western Balkan nationals of all skill and German language proficiency levels; the main requirement is a binding job offer from an employer in Germany. An evaluation found that this pathway has seen demand from workers and employers, and that it has been successful in filling vacancies and in terms of labour market integration outcomes.³⁷ This can serve as a role model for providing a regulated pathway for refugees from specific third countries if they can demonstrate that they have a job opportunity waiting for them. Another approach would be to launch a sector-based labour pathway for refugees, i.e. to focus on facilitating labour mobility for sectors in high demand (for those who have secured a job offer).
- **Incorporating refugee labour mobility into migration and development cooperation to facilitate the mobility and/or upskilling of refugees.** Member States could make use of bilateral or multilateral talent mobility partnerships to provide labour migration opportunities for displaced persons as well as host community members, for instance, by ensuring that a certain number of places in the programme are reserved for people in need of international protection. [EU Talent Partnerships](#) aim to facilitate job matching and labour market mobility that is beneficial for migrants as well as sending and receiving countries by supporting mobility for study, work, and training purposes, and represent a potential avenue. International university partnerships, such as the [Pak-Austria Fachhochschule](#), offer another approach to training with a view to unlocking labour mobility opportunities.

36 Wagner, M., C. Katsiaficas, and G. Güzelant, *Germany's Western Balkans Regulation: Inspiration for facilitating refugee labour mobility?*, ICMPD, forthcoming.

37 Brückner, H. et al., *Labour migration to Germany based on the Western Balkans regulation: Strong demand and sound labour market integration*, IAB Brief Report 16|2020, Institute for Employment Research, 2020.

- **Adopting community sponsorship schemes that connect to employers.** The community sponsorship of refugees has typically focused on resettlement pathways to third countries, but it also holds promise for complementary pathways related to work. Canada's [Hospitality Industry Welcomes Refugee Employment-Linked Sponsorship \(HIRES\)](#) project, for example, enables private refugee sponsorship by Canadian employers and offers economic opportunities for young refugees. Integration support upon arrival includes vocational training at Camosun College, followed by a job opportunity and mentorship in the workplace. As community sponsorship continues to expand across Europe, building more connections with employers into programme design could enhance labour mobility opportunities for refugees.
- **Launching an initiative that builds on COVID-19 and Ukraine-related labour market fast tracks.** Several EU Member States have eased requirements so that refugees already on their territory could take up jobs more quickly in areas facing shortages, and such initiatives might be expanded to refugees abroad. Such a programme could target particular sectors or in-demand occupations, easing credential requirements for an initial period and offering language and vocational training for participants alongside their work.

Enhancing targeted initiatives

In the above approaches, incorporating a training element and partnering with the private sector offer ways to enhance opportunities for a wider group of displaced talent. Approaches could include:

- **Upskilling before and/or after arrival,** to facilitate the recruitment and career progression of displaced talent. Under the United Kingdom's [Healthcare Pilot](#), for instance, refugees are hired in more junior positions; after arrival, they complete the necessary training to become a nurse. Another option would be the adoption of a vocational training pathway, whereby individuals could take up an apprenticeship in an EU Member State while also attending language training and receiving support to transition to full-time employment.
- **Supporting the private sector to expand recruitment efforts,** to broaden opportunities for displaced talent by tapping into existing activities. Some companies are already working with refugees in Europe to provide practical training that is paired with job search support, as in the IT sector. Others recruit internationally and pair their efforts with language training before and after the arrival of new hires.³⁸ Both approaches could be expanded to facilitate the international recruitment and training of refugees.

38 Author interviews with private sector actors in Germany and the Netherlands.

CONCLUSION

Enabling, and facilitating, a higher degree of refugee labour mobility would better match the supply and demand of sought-after global talent, while providing vital opportunities for displaced persons attempting to navigate the challenges that come with their situations. Yet refugees are rarely a part of conversations on the global 'race for talent', not least in Europe. The expansion of complementary labour pathways could provide an important opportunity to change the dominant narrative about refugees – helping to foster a shift from seeing refugees as (only) persons in need to viewing them for what they also are: people who can actively contribute to their host societies as much-needed workers, taxpayers, and citizens. However, for this shift to occur, a shift in mind set is needed to get (many) more stakeholders on board and expand complementary labour pathways in Europe. The resulting paradigm shift could also bring new impetus to the search for ways to deal with displacement.

Complementary pathways, and refugee labour mobility, have the potential to be a game changer – and their potential in Europe is just beginning to be realised. In this context, earnest and quick endeavour can bring disproportional gains in the future.

ANNEX 1 – SELECTED EXISTING LABOUR CHANNELS IN AUSTRIA, CZECHIA, GERMANY, THE NETHERLANDS, AND SWEDEN

Below are selected current labour migration channels for third-country nationals that might be considered in a complementary labour pathway scheme. They have not been designed with the situations of displaced persons in mind, and thus flexibility, adaptations, and/or targeted support for job candidates and employers would be important in enabling more refugees to utilise them to take up a job in these Member States.

AUSTRIA

- The **EU Blue Card** is a combined residence and work permit that entitles the holder to settle and work for a specific employer. It is issued with a validity of 2 years. Requirements are: a completed university degree, a binding job offer corresponding to the qualification for at least 1 year, a gross annual salary of at least €45,595 (2023), and an Arbeitsmarktservice (AMS) labour market examination.
- Qualified workers can obtain Austria's **Red-White-Red Card** (Rot-Weiß-Rot Karte, RWR Card). It is issued for 2 years and entitles holders to temporary settlement and employment with a specific employer. The RWR Card can be obtained by **very highly qualified workers**; **skilled workers in shortage occupations**; **specific key workers**; and **graduates of an Austrian university or college of higher education** (with specific conditions for each case). The RWR Card uses a criteria-based model, under which a minimum number of points must be achieved. The most important criteria for obtaining the card are qualification level, professional experience, language skills, and age, as well as an adequate job offer and corresponding salary (a minimum of €2,925 gross monthly salary in 2023).
- For those who have already been employed with an RWR Card for 21 months within a 24-month period, the **RWR Card plus** entitles cardholders to temporary residence and unrestricted labour market access. Skilled and key workers with an RWR Card plus are entitled to be joined by family members.

CZECHIA

- Third-country nationals who fulfil certain conditions can obtain an **EU Blue Card**, which combines residence and work permits, once they have received an offer for a highly qualified job. Applicants are required to prove 3 years of completed university or higher vocational education, in addition to a minimum gross monthly or annual wage corresponding to 1.5 times the Czech national average. For the period 1 May 2022 through 30 April 2023, this corresponds to a gross monthly salary of

at least CZK 56,759. The applicant's contract must be for at least 1 year and align with statutory weekly working hours. The EU Blue Card is valid for the duration of the employment contract and an additional 3 months, for a maximum of 2 years. Its validity can be extended for a further 2 years.

- Third-country nationals who fulfil certain conditions can obtain an [Employee Card](#), combining residence and work permits. Applicants must show an employment contract, an agreement to perform work, or an agreement for a future contract, along with documents proving the professional competence required by the job. The monthly salary should not be lower than the monthly minimum wage in Czechia, and the number of working hours should be at least 15 per week. The Employee Card is valid for the duration of the employment contract, for a maximum of 2 years. Its validity can be extended for a further 2 years.
- The [Key and Scientific Personnel Programme](#) supports investors, research organisations, technology companies, and start-ups by facilitating the employment of foreigners as statutory bodies, managers, or specialists (CZ-ISCO, classes 1-3) in the fields of production or services, or in the public sector. It applies to internally transferred and newly hired employees. This scheme guarantees the possibility of applying for a residence permit at Czech embassies, also for close family members, simplifying the application process and ensuring that processing occurs within 30 days of application.
- The [Highly Qualified Employee Programme](#) supports employers who need to bring highly qualified foreign workers (CZ-ISCO, classes 1-3) to Czechia. It applies to employees newly hired by companies operating in Czechia for at least 2 years in the fields of manufacturing or services, or in the public sector. This programme guarantees the possibility to apply for a residence permit at Czech embassies, also for close family members, and simplifies the application process.

GERMANY

- The [EU Blue Card](#) was introduced in 2012 to make it simpler for university graduates from non-EU countries to work legally in Germany. It is built on two requirements: applicants must demonstrate that they have successfully completed university studies, and must prove that they have a specific job offer with a set minimum annual salary (depending on the occupation). In 2023, the minimum annual gross salary required is €58,400, with a reduced minimum annual gross salary of €45,552 for those working in certain fields (mathematics, computer science, the natural sciences, engineering, and human medicine (excluding dentistry)).
- The [Working \(Employment\) Visa](#) is meant for qualified migrants willing to work in their field in Germany. Holders can enter and work in Germany for up to 2 years, with the possibility of extending the visa and later [applying for an EU Blue Card](#) or other type of residence permit. All foreign nationals can apply for an Employment Visa if they fulfil the conditions to work in Germany. Third-country nationals with a university degree or a non-academic vocational qualification can receive this visa if there is a shortage of skilled workers of their profession in the Germany labour market, they have a concrete job offer, and their education credentials are recognised. If a person is seeking employment in a regulated profession (e.g. health professions), s/he will need a professional practice permit. If a person is older than 45 years of age and comes to Germany for the first time for employment purposes, her/his gross annual salary for the position s/he intends on taking must be at least €48,180 or s/he must provide proof of adequate old-age pension provisions.

- There are special entry and employment rules in place for certain professions, including [IT specialists](#) and [professional drivers of heavy goods vehicles and buses](#) (as both are in high demand in the German labour market). Persons who have obtained a temporary residence permit on either of these grounds can usually extend this permit, as long as they have a valid employment contract. In both cases, it is also possible to apply for a settlement permit, if the person meets the necessary [requirements](#).
- The 2020 [Fachkräfteeinwanderungsgesetz](#) (Skilled Immigration Act) seeks to address labour market needs for qualified professionals and support employers who have been unable to fill vacant positions or find needed talent. The Act expands the definition of skilled workers to include those with qualified vocational training. It makes it easier for employers to recruit skilled workers with vocational training from a third country by removing the requirement that workers fill shortage occupations and that employers confirm that no German or EU citizens can be found to take up the position. Alongside easier recruitment conditions for employers, with this expanded definition of skilled workers, the Act has made it possible for skilled workers with vocational qualifications to come to Germany for the purpose of finding employment. Jobseekers can receive a residence permit for up to 6 months given certain prerequisites: their foreign qualification has been recognised by the competent body in Germany; they can prove sufficient funds to cover their living expenses for the duration of their stay; and they possess a knowledge of German appropriate to their desired activity (usually at least B1 level)).
- In March 2023, the German Federal Cabinet [presented a draft law](#) for the further development of skilled labour immigration, building on the Skilled Immigration Act (2020) outlined above. The proposed piece of legislation is designed to open up new opportunities in Germany for skilled workers from non-EU countries. In the draft, three main ways for skilled workers to immigrate are set out, based on qualifications, experience, and potential. Among other objectives, the draft aims to make the EU Blue Card more accessible by lowering the minimum salary threshold. The law also introduces facilitations in view of educational migration and recognition requirements, and provides the option of residence in Germany for the purpose of carrying out recognition procedures. Furthermore, an opportunity card will be introduced for people who do not yet have a concrete job offer but can demonstrate the potential gain they could bring to the labour market. The draft law proposes a points system based on certain criteria (qualifications, knowledge of German and English, work experience, connection to Germany, age, and the potential of life or marriage partners). At the time of writing, the draft law has not been officially adopted or debated in the German Parliament.

THE NETHERLANDS

- The [European Blue Card Residence Permits](#) allow for the highly qualified employment of third-country nationals. To obtain a Blue Card, workers need to fulfil certain requirements, such as having an employment contract of at least 12 months, a higher education diploma (for a course of study of at least 3 years in duration) that aligns with the function which the applicant will perform in the Netherlands, and a gross monthly salary of at least €5,867.
- The [Dutch Highly-Skilled Migrant Programme](#), also known as the Knowledge Worker Scheme (*Kennismigrant*), aims to attract third-country nationals to perform highly-qualified work. While

applicants do not need a higher education diploma, they do need to be employed by a company or research institution that is a sponsor recognised by the Dutch Immigration and Naturalisation Service (IND). Income requirements also need to be met; the threshold varies from a gross monthly salary of €2,631 to €5,008, depending on age and other criteria.³⁹

SWEDEN

- Third-country nationals who fulfil certain conditions can obtain an [EU Blue Card](#) and work in Sweden once they have received an offer for a highly qualified job. Applicants are required to demonstrate the attainment of 180 university credits or 5 years of professional experience, in addition to a minimum annual salary.
- Third-country nationals can obtain a [work permit](#) if they have a concrete job offer and an employment contract. The terms of employment and salary must be on par with those set by Swedish collective agreements or customary conditions within the particular occupation or industry. The salary must be at least SEK 13,000 per month before tax, and the employer must provide insurance covering health, life, employment, and pension.
- Third-country researchers are exempt from the work permit requirement, but must apply for a [residence permit](#) if they stay in Sweden for longer than 3 months. Once their research is completed, there is a possibility to obtain a [residence permit to seek employment or start a business](#).

39 For more see Knoll, A. *Re-thinking Approaches to Labour Migration: Potentials and Gaps in Four EU Member States' Migration Infrastructures, Case Study Netherlands, MPF, November 2022.*

ANNEX 2 – OTHER LABOUR MIGRATION INITIATIVES IN AUSTRIA, CZECHIA, GERMANY, THE NETHERLANDS, AND SWEDEN

In addition to the generally available labour migration channels listed in Annex 1, other government labour migration initiatives have the potential to reach displaced persons seeking a job in the EU. While not currently targeting such persons, their scope could be expanded or they could serve as inspiration to reach displaced persons in particular countries or occupations.

EU

- The [EU Talent Partnerships](#) aim to facilitate job matching and labour market mobility that benefits both migrants and sending and receiving countries by supporting mobility for study, work, and training purposes. They place a focus on North African countries as well as Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nigeria, and Senegal. Dedicated EU funding is available to support partnerships that are aligned with the Talent Partnership policy framework (such as through Migration Partner Facility (MPF) or Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) funding). This could be used to co-fund initiatives that benefit in Member States and priority countries, and might reach members of host communities alongside refugees.

AUSTRIA

- The [Pak-Austria Fachhochschule: Institute of Applied Science and Technology](#) is a collaboration between Pakistan and selected Austrian and Chinese universities. It aims to strengthen technical education infrastructure, so that students graduate with skills that align with prevailing labour market needs (in the country or elsewhere). Students are awarded a dual degree, ensuring that they receive an education comparable to that of graduates from the partner universities in Austria or China. The institute includes departments and research centres covering the areas of process engineering, design, and media technologies, applied computer sciences, medical technologies, energy, and environmental engineering, electrical engineering, civil engineering, transportation engineering, mineral resource engineering, extraction metallurgy, and agriculture and forestry.

CZECHIA

- The [Qualified Worker Programme](#) is intended for employers that have been operating in Czechia for a period of at least 2 years, employ at least 6 people, and want to employ citizens of Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, India, Kazakhstan, Moldova, Mongolia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, the Philippines, Serbia, or Ukraine. This programme supports employers who need to bring qualified foreign workers (CZ-ISCO, classes 4-8) to Czechia, offering the possibility to apply for an Employee Card at Czech embassies. Applicants should be hired to work in manufacturing industry, services, or the public sector.

GERMANY

- The [Hand in Hand for International Talents](#) pilot project aims to connect foreign skilled workers and German companies via the Skilled Immigration Act (2020) (see Annex 1). It supports SMEs in recruiting foreign skilled workers and accompanies businesses and skilled workers during the entire process. The project aims to recruit skilled workers from target countries (Vietnam, Brazil, and India) and target sectors or occupations experiencing high labour demand (IT and software development, electrical engineering, cooks, hotel service, catering, and hospitality). It is jointly implemented by the Association of German Chambers of Industry and Commerce and the Federal Employment Agency. It is funded by the Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy.
- The [Towards a Holistic Approach to Labour Migration Governance and Labour Mobility in North Africa](#) (THAMM) project aims to support development Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia via legal migration and mobility to Germany (while filling vacancies in Germany). It is funded by the EU via the Emergency Trust Fund for Stability and Addressing the Root Causes of Irregular Migration and Displaced Persons in Africa and the German Federal Ministry for Development (BMZ). It is implemented by the International Labour Organization, the International Organization for Migration, and the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ). The [mobility component](#) of this project includes: 1) a pilot for youth from North Africa to undertake vocational training or take up skilled work in Germany; 2) dialogues within and between sending and receiving country institutions overseeing labour migration; 3) the development of tools to examine and promote safe labour migration pathways in the longer term; and 4) study trips and exchanges on training and qualifications in the context of labour migration for institutions engaged in this field.
- The [Triple Win nurses – Sustainable recruitment of nurses from third countries for employment in Germany](#) project has promoted the sustainable recruitment of nursing staff from abroad since 2013, targeting Bosnia and Herzegovina, Indonesia, Jordan, the Philippines, Tunisia, and Kerala (India). It aims to achieve a 'triple win' whereby 1) pressure is eased on labour markets in origin countries; 2) migrants' remittances provide a developmental stimulus in origin countries; and 3) the shortage of nurses in Germany is alleviated. It is implemented as a cooperation between the GIZ and the German Federal Employment Agency's Central Placement Services (ZAV).

- The [Western Balkans Regulation](#) has facilitated access to the German labour market since 2016 for nationals of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo,⁴⁰ Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. Citizens from these states can obtain the approval of the Federal Employment Agency for any employment, regardless of their qualifications and language proficiency, as long as 1) they have a concrete job offer; 2) there is no preferential domestic worker is available to take up the job; and 3) working conditions are not less favourable than those of comparable German workers. The programme was originally set to last from 2016-2020, but has since been extended through 2023. The German Government published a [draft law](#) and [accompanying regulations for its implementation](#) in March 2023 under which the programme's end date would be abolished and the annual quota increased to 50,000. It has also expressed a wish to extend the Regulation to additional countries using migration agreements (with no specific further steps mentioned). At the time of writing, the law has not been adopted.

40 All references to Kosovo in this document should be understood to be in the context of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999).