

## Background

Small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are crucial to the EU's economy, making up 99.8% of all enterprises and employing 88.7 million people.<sup>1</sup> However, skills shortages pose a major challenge to SMEs. While many SMEs express an interest in tapping into international talent, they encounter significant barriers to doing so in most Member States. Additionally, a lack of in-house expertise and external support makes it difficult to attract, onboard, and retain skilled workers. Targeted support for SMEs can thus play a valuable role across the recruitment and employment journey. Given the nature of SMEs, this support could be rendered more efficient by investing not directly in individual employers but rather in “bridging actors” who work with SMEs, such as umbrella organisations, profession and industry associations, public employment services, and business and local development agencies.

The BRIDGE research project is developing tools to enable bridging actors to provide more robust support for SMEs so that they can more easily navigate the recruitment and onboarding of foreign workers and support new hires in settling in. This research is supported by the European Union and commissioned through the ICMPD-led Migration Partnership Facility (MPF).

## Objectives

The overarching aim of this research project is to enhance the capacity of bridging actors to support SMEs in recruiting and retaining international talent, thereby addressing skills shortages, fostering innovation, and contributing to long-term competitiveness and sustainability. The specific objectives are to:

1. **Identify bridging actors** that are best placed to address the needs of SMEs in the context of international recruitment, with a focus on current best practices
2. **Propose practical measures** with which bridging actors can further support SMEs, based on extensive research, analysis, and consultations
3. **Equip SMEs with practical tools** related to the attraction and retention of international talent
4. **Foster peer learning and knowledge sharing** by actively engaging with bridging actors to enhance SMEs' capacity to navigate the complexities of international talent attraction and retention

## FINAL OUTPUTS:

A **policy brief** outlining strategies for supporting SMEs through bridging actors

**Integration guidance** to help SMEs successfully onboard and retain international workers

## TIMELINE:

April 2025 → March 2026

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<sup>1</sup> Katsinis, A. et al. (2024), [Annual Report on European SMEs 2023/2024](#), Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2024.