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POLICYBRIEF

JUSTMIG

From Temporary to Essential: Rethinking Labour Migration in Slovenia

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Slovenia is increasingly dependent on temporary labour migrants to address structural labour shortages. However, current policies do not adequately ensure fair and supportive conditions for these workers. This policy brief offers actionable recommendations to guide evidence-based policymaking. A key challenge is balancing the need for swift labour market access with the long-term, dignified integration of migrant workers. This requires the active involvement of social partners in shaping inclusive employment practices, as well as the establishment of effective monitoring and enforcement mechanisms. Our focus is on **temporary labour migration**, by which we refer to migrants with temporary residence in Slovenia and/or short-term employment contracts.

INTRODUCTION

Temporary labour migration is an increasingly prominent feature of the Slovenian labour market, driven by demographic changes and sector-specific labour shortages. Migration is not only growing in scale but also becoming more geographically dispersed. While it may provide short-term economic benefits, its long-term sustainability depends on integrating migrant workers beyond the scope of employment alone. Without the establishment of inclusive mechanisms and the strengthening of institutions responsible for supervision and enforcement in labour and social law, the risks of social fragmentation and exploitation are significantly heightened.

This policy brief synthesises fresh research findings to propose measures that promote equitable and sustainable integration, and socially just labour market in Slovenia and transnationally. Migrant workers with temporary residence and short-term employment contracts in **the food industry** and **the retail sector** face a range of complex, interrelated challenges. Firstly, they work in environments with extremely challenging conditions that border on sweatshop-like conditions (e.g. warehouses and production sites). Secondly, overseas migration is driven by the dual need to secure residence status and maximise income due to outstanding debt and other factors, which has a harmful impact on local labour market. Thirdly, recruitment has been taken over by migration-centred services that involve agencies, brokers, attorneys, educational institutions and many other actors. Finally, (often poor) dormitories for migrants are being re-established, exacerbating social segregation.

CONTEXT

Labour Demand and Migration Trends

In recent years, both immigration and emigration in Slovenia have reached significant levels, with temporary migration exerting complex and far-reaching impacts on labour market structures and industrial relations. The country has experienced a substantial influx of labour migrants, primarily from Western Balkan countries and, increasingly, from Southeast Asia. These workers are often employed in low-paid, precarious jobs across sectors such as construction, transport, manufacturing, logistics, temporary work agencies, and hospitality. In addition to the volume of migration, a wide range of employment arrangements for migrant workers has emerged.

Labour shortages in Slovenia have driven large-scale immigration, with the number of migrants from third countries tripling over the past decade—from 40,000 in 2013 to 120,000 in 2023. While the majority of third-country migrants have traditionally come from the Western Balkans (including 56% from Bosnia and Herzegovina, 13.5% from Kosovo, and 13% from Serbia), the most rapid recent growth has been among migrants from South Asian countries. Notably, around 38% of foreign workers are posted to other EU countries—such as Germany, Austria, and Belgium—underscoring Slovenia's emerging role as a transit hub in international labour migration.

This policy brief focuses on temporary migrant labour in the food industry and retail sector. Between March 2024 and February 2025, we conducted over 20 interviews with migrant workers, social partners, and various stakeholders (including NGOs). The findings reveal that certain roles—particularly in food production and retail warehousing—are now almost entirely filled by migrant workers. These include long-established migrants from the Balkans as well as a growing number from Asian countries such as India, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Iran. In-depth interviews with workers highlighted systemic issues, including long working hours, night shifts, work intensification, subcontracting, inadequate workplace safety, and undeclared employment. Many interviewees

also reported that a significant portion of migrant workers in large Slovenian retail chains and food production facilities are employed also through the student work service—a mechanism that often conceals actual employment relationships. For those seeking alternative or more suitable jobs, agency work is often the only option—despite the fact that agencies are not supposed to employ migrants who lack direct access to the labour market. Notably, only one in fifteen workers interviewed was a member of a company trade union.

Policy Gaps and Identified Challenges

Slovenia's volatile economic cycles—where periods of high unemployment during recessions are quickly followed by rapid growth and labour shortages—have led employers to favour a flexible, temporary workforce that can be hired as needed and easily let go. As a result, temporary labour migration has become a structural feature of the Slovenian economy. However, the country's migration and labour market policies have not kept pace with its increasing reliance on foreign labour. Administrative units are struggling to manage the volume of incoming migrants, often failing to issue permits in a timely manner. Despite various interventions, significant delays persist; in some cases, migrant workers wait over a year for a response, and in extreme situations, up to four years. Moreover, local administrative units apply inconsistent procedures and documentation requirements. They demand supplementary materials—such as complete bank account statements—that arguably infringe on migrants' right to privacy. While certain state institutions, such as the Financial Administration (FURS) and the Employment Service (ZRSZ), are managing relatively well, others—particularly administrative units and the Labour Inspectorate—are widely criticised for inefficiency and lack of coordination.

While the enforcement power of market institutions has weakened, private actors involved in labour intermediation have grown stronger. The recruitment of migrant workers predominantly occurs via agencies. As temporary work agencies cannot employ foreigners who have restricted access to the labour market, these intermediators recruit migrants and sell them to their employers. Under the false pretext of being sponsors, these agencies keep migrants in a state of dependency and poor working conditions with incorrect or incomplete information. Many overseas workers arrive in Europe in debt, typically owing between €5,000 and €12,000, which they must repay through their labour. Co-nationals also frequently function as intermediaries, engaging in the exploitation of their fellow citizens from Kosovo, Nepal, India and Bangladesh.

The dominant framing of temporary migration in Slovenia is utilitarian—viewing migrant workers primarily through the lens of economic necessity rather than as individuals with long-term social and human needs. This approach risks creating a permanent class of temporary, disenfranchised workers. Social partners—particularly trade unions and civil society organizations—have expressed concerns about this growing discrepancy. Measures to integrate migrants by supporting their Slovenian language proficiency enabled access to basic language courses. However, it has proven to be a double-edged sword. Not passing the language test can result in exclusion from social rights, as was the case with Kosovar women. It can also directly interfere in the process of unifying the family of a migrant worker.

ANALYSIS and DISCUSSION

- **Restrictive legal frameworks** limit the duration of stay for migrant workers and offer few pathways to permanent residence. **Low union membership among migrants**—largely a

consequence of their precarious status and employer-imposed disciplinary practices—further exacerbates their vulnerability.

- **Innovative small-scale initiatives** exist but remain underfunded. State provides project-funded support, which is not sustainably available. Independent organizations step in to fill the gap: the Counselling Office for Workers (*Delavska svetovalnica*) and the Independent Workers' Union of Slovenia – NSDS (*Neodvisni sindikat delavcev Slovenije*) have established independent funding sources, primarily through membership fees paid by migrant workers. These organizations provide reliable support in addressing the administrative challenges migrants commonly face.
- **Strengthening the role of social partners:** Trade unions, chambers of commerce, and civil society actors must play an institutional role in shaping and monitoring migrant labour policies. They should also develop new approaches to organizing migrant workers and fostering solidarity. Many migrants already engage in informal and spontaneous forms of workplace organizing and resistance in response to harsh working conditions. These efforts should be recognized, supported, and reinforced through formal structures of solidarity.
- **Data transparency and monitoring:** Enhanced data collection on the conditions of migrant workers is essential for informed policymaking and evaluating progress. There is a clear need for more publicly accessible data. In parallel, effective institutions for monitoring and enforcement must be strengthened to ensure accountability and protect workers' rights.

Key issues highlighted in the JUSTMIG research on Slovenia include migrant workers' indebtedness, the role of employment agencies, and substandard housing conditions, particularly in the form of migrant dormitories.

1. Fragmented Governance and Insufficient Integration Services

Integration efforts remain underdeveloped and underfunded. Though under the main auspices of the Ministry of the Interior, responsibilities for financing and enacting integration measures are factually spread across various departments, with limited coordination. NGOs often take the initiative in offering support services to migrants, but these remain under-resourced and disconnected from national policy frameworks. Without a centralized approach or guiding vision, efforts to integrate migrant workers remain half-hearted, leading to inconsistencies in access to services, rights protections, and integration outcomes. Despite having access to language courses, migrant workers complained about the quality and suitability of these courses, and access is sometimes uneven. Language schools are not present everywhere and struggle with accommodating all the migrants' needs. The migrants also mentioned that a prominent company only offers online Slovenian language courses to migrants with employment contracts, while this option is not available to those working on student referrals, even though they perform equally responsible work. Language training, legal counselling, cultural orientation, and access to housing are not systematically available to migrant workers. Where such services exist, they are often the result of time-limited projects or local-level initiatives driven by NGOs or municipalities. These services are essential not just for social cohesion, but also for economic productivity—migrant workers who are better integrated are more likely to remain in the country, contribute more effectively, and build stronger communities.

2. Labour Market Exploitation and Structural Dependency

Employers have long held a dominant position in shaping Slovenia's migration regime, particularly through the use of tied work permits, which limited workers' mobility and increased their

dependency—especially in cases involving migrants from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia. This system reinforced unequal power dynamics, heightened the risk of exploitation, and discouraged migrant workers from reporting abuse or seeking better employment opportunities. Although there have been legal improvements and the formal introduction of worker protections, enforcement mechanisms—such as labour inspections—remain underutilized. Many migrants are unaware of their rights or fear retaliation if they speak out. This structural dependency not only increases vulnerability but also undermines long-term integration by treating migrant workers as disposable labour rather than as active stakeholders in the economy and society.

3. Limited Access to Representation and Social Dialogue

Migrant workers are largely absent from formal structures of labour representation and social dialogue. Trade unions struggle to engage with them due to language barriers, mobility restrictions, and lack of trust. Moreover, migrants often do not see unions as relevant to their experiences, especially if they perceive them as focused on domestic workers' rights. At the same time, social partners are not very interested, let alone engaged in the migrants' position. This gap weakens the democratic legitimacy of labour policy and misses an opportunity for inclusive policy development. Trade unions must evolve and dedicate greater efforts to effectively organizing and supporting migrant workers.

4. Temporariness as a Long-Term Condition

Although many migrants are classified as “temporary,” a significant number remain in Slovenia for extended periods. However, current policies fail to reflect this reality. Short-term permits create instability, while lack of sufficient funds due to low wages limit migrants' access to family reunification and hinder their ability to plan for the long term. As a result, temporariness effectively becomes a prolonged state, without the rights or pathways necessary for integration. Insights from workshops with key stakeholders, interviews, and background research all underscore the urgent need for policies to better align with the actual experiences of migrant workers. This requires shifting from simply managing temporary stays to establishing clear pathways toward secure status and full participation in society.

CONCLUSION

Slovenia stands at a critical juncture. The temporary nature of labour migration is increasingly at odds with the permanent contributions of migrant workers. Without inclusive, well-coordinated policies, Slovenia risks undermining both social cohesion and labour market sustainability. This brief calls on policymakers and social partners to act decisively—embracing the JUSTMIG vision of equitable integration that aligns economic needs with social justice.

Two key issues should be emphasized:

1. **Timely issuance of permits by administrative units is urgently needed.** Some individuals wait one or even two years without receiving a response, leaving them in extremely uncertain and vulnerable situations.
2. **It is essential that migrants receive clear information upon arrival — or ideally, beforehand — about where to seek help in case of problems.** This would reduce their dependence on employers, agencies, or “bosses” within their ethnic communities who may deliberately withhold

information and foster conditions for exploitation. Two organizations that already play this role effectively are the previously mentioned Counselling Office for Workers and the NSDS.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Strengthen Social Dialogue

Empower social partners to effectively represent the interests of migrant workers. Establish structured opportunities for trade unions and employer organizations to engage in dialogue on migrant labour issues, including through joint training initiatives and awareness campaigns. We recommend that social partners consider financial support through a mutual fund for administrative support to migrant workers. However, it is essential to maintain the independence of organizations such as the Counselling Office for Workers and the NSDS. Financial support could therefore be structured through cooperation agreements with relevant national and local authorities and institutions. It is in the social partners' best interest to ensure that migrants have access to reliable information and support from the moment they arrive in Slovenia. We also recommend supporting the Centre for Social Research Cedra, as it organizes migrants, develops new methods and strategies on the ground, and thus empowers trade unions.

2. Enhance Protection of Labour Rights

Ensure the timely issuance of permits by administrative units to avoid prolonged uncertainty for migrant workers. Labour inspections and complaint mechanisms must be accessible, migrant-friendly, and supported by multilingual services and effective whistleblower protections.

3. Integrated Services

Develop a national strategy that mandates cross-sector collaboration, coordinated by a dedicated body within the Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities. It is essential that migrants receive clear, accessible information upon arrival — or ideally beforehand — about where to turn in case of problems. This information should be provided in a user-friendly format, including through social media, and allow access for migrants outside regular working hours. Expand access to essential services such as housing, healthcare, language courses, and legal aid. Additionally, funding cultural mediators to improve communication, build trust, and facilitate access to services — particularly in cases where language courses are insufficient or not equally accessible to all migrant workers.

