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Forever temporary? Migration patterns of posted workers and their implications for free movement

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Abstract

The number of posted workers within Europe has seen impressive growth over recent years. Yet there remain gaps in our understanding of their mobility patterns and how these intersect with free movement migration. This article examines the extent to which the trajectories of posted workers exhibit signs of settlement migration. Our analysis is based on a unique dataset that connects microdata from Belgium's posting declaration tool with national register and social security data. Our findings show that posting is highly circular and that not all of posting is for short term work. Posting is also "sticky" over time. Yet, even if there clearly is a permanent dimension to the posting of workers, only a very small share of workers settle after having had a posting experience. The situation of posted workers is one of "lasting temporariness". We hypothesise why that is the case.

Keywords: Posting, posted workers, free movement, settlement, migration, Belgium

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Introduction

Intra-EU labour mobility is a core feature of the European single market, encompassing various forms of movement.¹ While some flows involve permanent migration, others include short-term or circular moves, all facilitated by the free movement of workers. Labour mobility also includes “functional equivalents” of migration, such as the *posting of workers* under the free movement of services (Galgóczy & Leschke, 2015). Posting of workers has expanded spectacularly after the 2004 EU enlargement. In 2023, there were an estimated 5.5 million posting contracts involving 3.5 million posted workers across Europe (European Commission et al., 2025). The scale of posting raises important questions about its relationship with other forms of labour mobility, particularly permanent-type free movement migration. *Do posted workers eventually transition into migrant workers?* This remains an open empirical question. This article is the first to systematically investigate whether and under what conditions posted workers settle in the destination country and become migrant workers. Using unique linked administrative data from Belgium, one of the largest recipients of posted workers in both relative and absolute terms, it examines the interaction between posting and free movement migration at the worker level.

Scholarly debate on the relationship between posting and standard migration has primarily focused on the *macro-level*, examining whether these two forms of labour mobility function as complements or substitutes. An early hypothesis suggested that posting served as a 'back door' migration route for workers from the new EU member states when older member states imposed temporary restrictions on their free movement (Dølvik & Visser, 2009; Wagner & Hassel, 2016). As posting not only persisted but expanded even after free movement was fully liberalised, this hypothesis became increasingly difficult to sustain. For a long time, however, empirical testing of posting-migration interactions was hindered by limited data on posting flows. A recent key study by Muñoz (2024) brings together data on cross-country posting and migration flows and finds that posting neither replaces nor is replaced by conventional migration. Exploiting cross-country variation in the relative timing of free movement and posting liberalisation for workers from new EU member states, the study demonstrates that posting liberalisation had minimal crowding-out effects on free movement migration, while the expansion of posting flows was also unaffected by the liberalisation of free movement. These findings suggest that posting and traditional migration are distinct, complementary forms of labour mobility rather than substitutes.

However, while macro-level research suggests no strong interaction between posting and free movement migration, this does not exclude the possibility that some posted workers eventually transition into migrant workers. So far, no empirical study has systematically examined this at the *micro-level*. At first glance, the boundaries between posted workers and free movement migrants may seem rigid, but they are not impermeable (Glick Schiller & Salazar, 2013). The European single market and its four freedoms allow for some degree of status mobility. For instance, a posted worker may transition into a free movement migrant by leaving their home-country employer and signing a local employment contract in the destination country.

If we consider the broader literature on intra-European migration, it seems likely that some posted workers would eventually settle in the destination country. Studies on the trajectories and strategies of ‘new European migrants’ show that they often revise their migration plans, shifting from temporary

¹ The terms “Europe”, “EU” and “member states” are used in this article to indicate the 28 European Union member states (including the United Kingdom).

stays to long-term commuting or permanent settlement (Drinkwater & Garapich, 2015; Luthra et al., 2018). A common pattern among contemporary EU migrants is the desire to establish stable and secure lives (Bygnes & Erdal, 2017). However, this literature has largely ignored posted workers.

At the same time, while research on posted workers' mobility strategies is limited, qualitative studies do suggest that posted workers sometimes use migration and settlement to improve their working and living conditions (Houwerzijl & Berntsen, 2019). Biographical interviews reveal cases of former posted workers who later secured local contracts in the host country, viewing posting as a transitional phase toward more stable employment and integration into the host country. Although these qualitative findings remain scarce, they highlight a *key tension* between the macro-level research and posted workers' individual migration patterns. They certainly caution against viewing posting as a static event rather than a *dynamic*, evolving process.

This paper bridges the gap between macro- and micro-level perspectives by conducting an empirical analysis of the interaction between posting and free movement migration. The main research question is whether posted workers ever transition into migrant workers. To answer this, we use a *unique dataset for Belgium*, linking posting registry data with national register and social security records. Belgium is one of the only European countries (along with France) that maintains a longstanding posting registry with microdata available for research. Given Belgium's open economy, highly institutionalized labour market, and strong corporatist tradition, it serves as a representative case for high-wage North-Western European countries. Belgium is also among the top receiving countries for posted workers in the EU (De Wispelaere et al., 2022). These characteristics make Belgium a valuable case for studying the relationship between posting and free movement migration in Europe.

This article begins with a literature review on intra-EU migration and posting, exploring why posted workers are largely absent from migration studies. It then examines the theoretical mechanisms that may explain whether or not posted workers transition into free movement migrants. Before presenting our findings, we briefly describe our dataset. The empirical analysis first investigates posted workers' mobility patterns, focusing on the duration and frequency of posting jobs, before assessing whether posted workers exhibit signs of more permanent migration and settlement. The article concludes with a broader discussion on the possible mechanisms shaping workers' decisions to remain in the posting system, and the implications for political debates on the role of posting in the European single market.

Intra-European migration dynamics and the missing posted worker

From liquidity and unpredictability to social anchoring

Labour mobility within Europe has been extensively studied, particularly in the context of increasing East-West and South-North migration following the EU enlargements and the financial crisis. Scholars have sought to understand the varied trajectories, motivations, and strategies of 'new European migrants', with a key focus on whether their migration remains temporary or leads to long-term settlement (Engbersen et al., 2013; Verwiebe et al., 2014).

To capture diverse temporal migration projects researchers have developed typologies based on motivations, labour market opportunities, transnational ties, family structures, and settlement plans (Düvell & Vogel, 2006; Eade et al., 2006; Engbersen et al., 2012; Grabowska-Lusinska, 2013). For instance, Eade et al. (2006) developed a typology of Polish migrants in the UK. They identified "storks" who work for a few months each year and commute between home and host countries; "hamsters" who migrate temporarily to accumulate capital before returning; "searchers" who intentionally keep their

options open; and “stayers” who intend to settle permanently. Similar classifications have been proposed by other scholars. While these studies vary in emphasis, they consistently show that, unlike the traditional model of largely permanent migration, recent intra-European migration is increasingly circular, temporary, and transnational.

Several theoretical concepts have been introduced to explain these new patterns, including “lasting temporariness” (Grzymała-Kazłowska, 2005), “intentional unpredictability” (Eade et al., 2006), “deliberate indeterminacy” (Moriarty et al., 2010), and “liquid migration” (Engbersen et al., 2012). These concepts stress how contemporary intra-EU migration is marked not only by *high mobility* but also by *uncertainty*, with many young migrants moving flexibly without fixed long-term plans (Nijhoff & Gordano, 2017). Institutional features such as open borders, short travel distances, affordable transport, digital communication, and transnational networks allow migrants to “strategize around their mobility and temporariness” (Alberti, 2014), adjusting their movement in response to changing economic conditions.

Research further highlights the *dynamic* nature of migration strategies, showing that intra-European migrants frequently revise their initial plans (Drinkwater & Garapich, 2015; Luthra et al., 2018; Strockmeijer et al., 2019). For example, Friberg (2012) found that many Polish migrants in Norway initially start out as target earners but later transition into long-term transnational commuting or permanent settlement. While some scholars emphasize the unpredictability of migration trajectories, others argue that most new European migrants actively seek grounded lives (Bygnes & Erdal, 2017), and that, as they age and spend more years in host countries, many develop “social anchors” (Grzymała-Kazłowska, 2018) and “embed” themselves in local contexts (Ryan, 2018).

Building on these insights, scholars have further examined the key drivers of migration decisions, highlighting both economic factors – such as wages, job stability, and financial security – and social and cultural influences, including social networks, transnational ties, lifestyle preferences, and self-fulfilment (Piętka-Nykaza & McGhee, 2017; Verwiebe et al., 2014; White & Ryan, 2008).

Where is the posted worker in this literature?

Despite extensive research on intra-European migration dynamics, posted workers remain largely overlooked in this literature. Most studies focus on the free movement of workers, neglecting mobility under the freedom to provide services, which has nonetheless generated significant cross-border labour flows within Europe. Before contemplating why posting has been excluded from migration studies, it is essential to clarify what posting entails, how it differs from standard migration, and why its mobility patterns warrant closer analysis.

A posted worker is temporarily sent by their employer to another EU member state as part of a contractual service provision. Unlike standard migrants, whose mobility is self-initiated, posted workers move at the initiative of the sending firm. They do not hold an employment contract in the destination country, remain covered by the tax system² and social security system³ of the sending country, and are

² For postings up to 183 days, personal income taxes are paid in the home country (the country of residence). If a posting exceeds 183 days, personal income taxes should be paid in the host country.

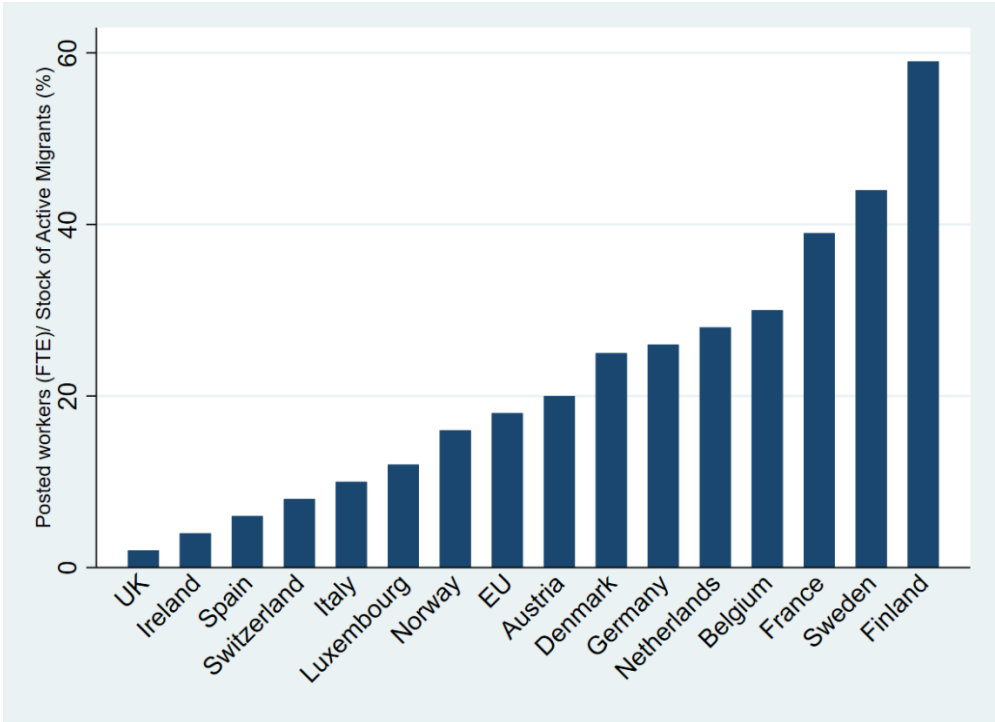
³ For postings of up to 24 months, social security contributions are paid in the worker’s home country. If a posting exceeds 24 months, social security contributions must generally be paid in the host country.

subject only to minimum standards on employment conditions⁴ in the destination country. Because they do not formally integrate into the local labour market, their access to social rights in the destination country is limited, and they are not entitled to bring family members with them.

Although statistical data on posting come with uncertainties, available figures suggest that it has grown significantly, particularly after the EU enlargements. In 2023, there were an estimated 5.5 million postings involving 3.5 million posted workers across Europe (European Commission et al., 2025). Because workers can be posted for a very short period of time (see below), it is necessary to correct for the duration of work during their posting contract abroad. Even in full-time equivalents, the scale of posting remains impressive. Our own calculation on PD A1 data shows that the number of FTE posted workers grew from 700,000 in 2012 to 2 million in 2022.

Figure 1 compares posted worker flows with the total EU migrant workforce in the EU. In 2022, posted workers (in full-time equivalents) accounted for 18% of all working-age active EU migrants across the EU. In countries such as Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Sweden and Finland, the contribution of posting to the EU migrant workforce is even higher, exceeding 20%.

Figure 1. Posted workers accounted for almost one in five EU migrants in 2022



Notes: This figure compares the flows of posted workers (in full-time equivalents, FTEs) to the stock of EU migrants. To estimate posting flows, we use the PD A1 dataset, which records social security forms issued for postings within the EU. Since A1 forms cover only EU-based postings, workers from non-EU companies are not included, making the total number of posted workers a lower-bound estimate. We estimate FTEs using average posting durations by sending country, with imputed values for missing data based on previous years or similar countries. Multi-destination postings are allocated proportionally based on the distribution of single-destination postings from the same country. The stock of the EU migrant workforce is estimated using EU-LFS 2022, focusing

⁴ For posted workers, wages and working conditions are governed by a minimum ‘hard core’ set of terms and conditions of the host country, including minimum wages (since 2020 the same remuneration as local workers and relevant allowances). After 12 months of posting (extendable to 18 months upon notification), they are entitled to almost full equal treatment under the labour law of the host country.

on working-age EU citizens who live and work in a country other than their citizenship and are active in the labour market (employed or unemployed).

Despite its scale, posting remains largely absent from migration research for several reasons. First, the geographic distribution of posted workers differs from free movement migrants. Most studies of intra-European migration focus on Polish migrants in the UK and Ireland where free movement clearly dominates, while posting is much more important in other countries. Second, posted workers are difficult to capture in population surveys, censuses, and administrative data due to their short-term stays. As a result, they are largely absent from quantitative analyses on intra-European migration dynamics (Strockmeijer et al., 2019). Third, even qualitative studies struggle to include posted workers, as this group is often physically and socially isolated while abroad. Although often overlooked in migration research, posted workers do conceptually resemble certain groups identified in migration typologies, such as ‘target earners’ or ‘circular migrants’. In fact, these studies may unwittingly include some posted workers without identifying them as distinct, partly because workers themselves are sometimes unaware of their posted status (Matyska, 2019; Thörnqvist & Bernhardsson, 2015).

At the same time, research on posting has largely focused on the exploitation and precarious position of posted workers (Berntsen, 2015), linking these issues to social dumping (Bernaciak, 2015; Cremers et al., 2007) and various forms of social fraud, regulatory arbitrage (Berntsen & Lillie, 2015) and regulatory evasion (Arnholtz, 2021; Lillie & Greer, 2007). Studies have shown that posting exerts pressure on local labour markets through wage dumping, deteriorating working conditions, fraudulent practices such as letterbox companies, and abuses related to working time and wages (Alsos & Eldring, 2008; Arnholtz & Andersen, 2018; Novitz & Andrijasevic, 2020). Scholars have also documented the emergence of a business model based on ‘cheap labour’ (Arnholtz & Lillie, 2020), particularly in labour-intensive sectors of high-wage countries, where posting is used to exploit differences in wages, employment regulations, and social security systems, ultimately undercutting local wage levels (Berntsen & Lillie, 2015). Moreover, research highlights the hierarchization of the European labour market, with posted workers occupying its most precarious positions (Arnholtz & Lillie, 2023).

However, scholars have also cautioned against an overly negative portrayal of posting. Next to fostering socio-economic convergence between member states, De Wispelaere & Pacolet (2019) pointed, among others, to advantages for the receiving country in terms of reduced labour shortages and seamless occupational mobility without the ‘threat’ of any welfare tourism. From the perspective of the sending country, the export of services through workers means higher tax revenues, higher purchasing power for its workers, and a potential cushioning in case of economic shocks. Scholars have also stressed that posting is more multifaceted than often assumed. Lens et al. (2022) for instance show that while cost-cutting is the primary motive for client firms to use posting, it is not the only one. Posting also helps firms address skill shortages, attract highly specialized temporary workers, and even support the professional development of high-potential employees, amongst others.

Despite these insights, there is limited research on the actual mobility strategies and experiences of posted workers (see below). A major barrier to understanding their trajectories is the lack of comprehensive microdata on posting. The separation between migration and posting studies leaves a crucial question unanswered: *do posted workers eventually transition into free movement migration?* The following section explores potential reasons why some workers might remain within the posting system while others could transition to more permanent migration.

Why posted workers would (not) become migrant workers

Migration patterns are shaped by a complex interplay of economic, social, and institutional factors. Several mechanisms suggest that posted workers may prefer to remain in the posting system rather than transition to free movement migration. Financially, posted work can be more lucrative than standard migration. Despite risks of exploitation and underpayment (Arnholtz & Lillie, 2023), posted workers often earn wages that are considerably higher than what they would receive in their home country. At the same time, they can spend these earnings in their home country, where living costs are typically lower. This wage differential and cost-of-living advantage can make posting financially more attractive than permanent migration (Caro et al., 2015). Many posted workers use their earnings to fund ‘life projects’ in their home country, which motivates their posting careers (Thörnqvist & Bernhardsson, 2015). Geographical proximity and the ease of cross-border travel further enhance this strategy, allowing them to maximise their financial gains.

Posting is also a form of employer-driven mobility, where foreign firms typically cover migration-related costs such as travel, accommodation, and work logistics.⁵ Many workers perceive this as an advantage, as it removes the burden of arranging these necessities independently (Caro et al., 2015). Research has shown that finding suitable housing, for instance, acts as a significant barrier to migration (Manting et al., 2024). The structured nature of posting thus provides a more economically attractive and flexible alternative to self-initiated migration, despite the vulnerabilities associated with it.

Employers may also prefer posting over permanent hires because it offers significant cost advantages. By employing posted workers, firms can benefit from lower social security contributions and taxes in the sending country, reducing overall labour costs (Lens et al., 2022b). Additionally, posting provides employers with a more flexible workforce, allowing them to adjust labour supply according to fluctuating labour needs without the long-term commitments associated with permanent contracts. Moreover, by hiring through posting arrangements, employers can bypass some of the administrative and regulatory complexities involved in direct recruitment within the host country’s labour market (Muñoz, 2023).

Beyond economic incentives, social factors may also discourage posted workers from transitioning to permanent migration. Many work in rotational systems, spending long hours abroad before returning home, which enables them to maintain strong family ties in their country of origin (Caro et al., 2015). This mobility pattern reinforces their social ties at home while limiting integration into the host country. Additionally, posted workers often experience social isolation while abroad, as their demanding work schedules and limited host country language skills leave little room for leisure or interaction with local communities. As a result, they develop weak ties to the host society, even if frequently working there (Caro et al., 2015; Voivozeanu, 2019). Consequently, the social networks that typically support long-term migration (see e.g., White & Ryan, 2008) remain underdeveloped for posted workers.

Institutional barriers further discourage permanent settlement. Many migrant workers find foreign social security and tax systems complex, uncertain, or restrictive, making them more inclined to maintain contributions in their home country (Mussche et al., 2018). This is particularly relevant for posted workers who frequently move across multiple countries (Muñoz, 2024). Additionally, the employer-driven nature of posting removes many labour market barriers associated with free movement migration,

⁵ Muñoz (2024) shows that employers directly covered transportation costs in 85% of posting contracts recorded in France, as well as housing costs in 80% of contracts and food expenses in 50%, providing evidence that sending firms bear these costs.

such as language requirements, job-search risks, and skills mismatches (Arnholtz & Lillie, 2023). Unlike free movement migrants, posted workers typically do not need to speak the host country's language, as assignments are arranged within employer networks where language proficiency is not required. In contrast, research shows that language skills play a crucial role in the labour market outcomes of free movement migrants (Leschke & Weiss, 2023). Risk aversion and limited job opportunities may further deter posted workers from transitioning to permanent migration, given that EU migrants often face significant overqualification and skills mismatches in host countries (Felbo-Kolding et al., 2019; Leschke & Weiss, 2020).

Despite the economic, social, and institutional factors favouring continued participation in the posting system over permanent migration, some posted workers may still choose to settle more permanently in the destination country. While the literature often portrays posting as a passive, employer-driven form of mobility – contrasting it with the more active, worker-driven nature of free movement migration – this perspective underestimates the agency of posted workers. A growing body of research suggests that posted workers actively strategize their mobility to improve their living standards (Alberti & Danaj, 2017; Andrijasevic & Sacchetto, 2016; Matyska, 2019). In fact, workers may use posting as a *stepping stone* to transition into more stable employment within the host country's labour market. Through their posting experience, they develop 'mobility power' (Alberti, 2014), leveraging their skills and local work experience to negotiate better employment conditions or direct contracts with local employers (Houwerzijl & Berntsen, 2019).

Qualitative studies confirm that such transitions occur. Caro et al. (2015) found, based on interviews with posted construction workers in the Netherlands, Germany, and Finland, that some saw posting as a temporary phase to gain host-country work experience, build social networks, and improve their chances of securing local contracts. Similarly, Sippola & Kall (2016) observed that Estonian construction workers in Finland viewed posting and agency work as stepping stones toward permanent employment with Finnish firms. In some cases, workers who initially accepted posting arrangements later transitioned to direct contracts with Finnish employers, seeking better working conditions and stability. In the German meat industry, Wagner (2015) documented how Polish workers who transitioned from posted employment to locally based agency work following industrial action secured higher wages, fixed monthly incomes, and better working conditions. Likewise, Berntsen (2015) found that Polish workers in a Dutch meat-processing factory who moved from posted to agency employment, and eventually to direct contracts, gained greater economic and social security. Friberg (2012), in a survey of Polish workers in Oslo, found no significant difference between free movement migrants and posted workers in their migration intentions, with many in both groups having flexible return plans and some expressing a desire to settle permanently.

In sum, there are arguments for both perspectives. On the one hand, posted workers are expected to remain within the posting system, attracted by financial advantages, employer-provided logistics, and strong social ties to their home country. On the other hand, for some, posting serves as a stepping stone to better opportunities in the host country's labour market. From a legal standpoint, conventional migration and posted work are clearly distinct. Yet strategically navigating different migration statuses appears to be a well-documented practice among posted workers in Europe. No study has empirically examined the migration trajectories of posted workers beyond their posting experience through a quantitative lens. Amid the competing theoretical mechanisms, the question of whether – and under what conditions – posted workers transition to permanent migration remains largely unexplored. This study seeks to address this gap. The following section outlines the microdata and empirical approach used to investigate this issue.

Unique linked administrative data for Belgium

Empirical assessments of posting mobility are hindered by the lack of reliable data. PD A1 forms, which track the social security coverage of posted workers, have long been the primary source for measuring posting flows in Europe. They are used by the European Commission for its annual reports and are also widely used by scholars. However, PD A1 data have significant limitations, including exemptions and enforcement gaps – in many countries, posting may occur without authorities being notified, or PD A1 forms are issued retroactively.

National prior declaration tools are also increasingly used in posting research. By now, all EU member states require foreign employers to pre-register posting missions, complementing the A1 forms. Despite cross-country variations in reporting requirements, these posting registries often provide a more reliable source for estimating bilateral posting flows. In most countries, they also allow for disaggregation by nationality, sending country, employment status, type of posting, and sector of activity.

For the type of research conducted in this article, however, more detailed data are needed. In fact, Belgium and France are the only European countries to have longstanding posting registries that allow researchers access to longitudinal microdata with *individual identifiers* (Muñoz, 2024). Such identifiers are needed to be able to link posting data with other administrative data sources. This article relies on the Belgian LIMOSA registry of incoming posted workers. All foreign firms posting employees to Belgium, including self-employed workers, must submit a LIMOSA declaration prior to the start of the posted work.⁶ Failure to file results in liability for sanctions and fines, and interruption of the posting assignment.

In the LIMOSA database, a posting contract is defined as the unique combination between a start and end date of the posting mission, a Belgian client, a foreign employer, a posted worker, and a declared workplace in Belgium. For our analysis, we use a 10% random sample of all workers registered in LIMOSA between 2010–2020. The LIMOSA data contains information on start and end of the posting mission, and unique IDs for the posted worker, the sending employer, the Belgian client and the place of work. It provides detailed characteristics on the posted worker (sex, date of birth, citizenship, sending country), the posting contract (duration, sector of work activity⁷, employment type), the employer (place of establishment), the client (place of establishment), and the place of work.⁸

Notably, a LIMOSA declaration triggers the automatic issuance of a Belgian social security number for the posted worker. We use this identifier to link posting data with individual-level national register and social security data from the Crossroads Bank for Social Security (CBSS), covering the period 2003–2019. The CBSS data provide yearly information on individuals' residency status, classified into: 'National Register' for individuals legally residing in Belgium (≥ 3 months); 'Bis Register' for

⁶ Some workers hired abroad who come to work temporarily to Belgium are exempted from a LIMOSA declaration, including scientists and researchers attending scientific events or participating in research programmes, top executives attending events, workers installing goods, athletes participating in international competitions, international civil servants, workers from international organizations, and businessmen.

⁷ There have been significant changes in how the sector of activity is reported in LIMOSA. Before July 2013, firms could register workers in 28 different sectors. Between July 2013 and October 2017, only two categories were reported: the construction sector or any other sector. After October 2017, firms could report activities in 17 specific sectors. Due to these inconsistencies, our analysis distinguishes only between construction and other sectors.

⁸ A LIMOSA declaration cannot be modified, only cancelled. Since interpreting cancelled notifications requires additional assumptions, we exclude them from our analysis.

individuals connected to Belgium but residing abroad or temporarily residing in Belgium (<3 months); and ‘Rad Register’ for individuals removed from the National Register due to relocation abroad. We use the longitudinal data on the residency status as a first indicator of posted workers' intentions to settle in Belgium.

The CBSS also provides quarterly information on individual's socio-economic status, sourced from the different Belgian social security institutions. It categorises individuals based on their main activity, following a hierarchical structure: ‘Employment’ captures employees and self-employed workers; ‘Unemployment’ covers recipients of unemployment benefits; ‘Other social benefits’ includes recipients of social assistance benefits, child benefits, sickness or disability benefits, or other allowances; and ‘Unknown’ for all individuals outside these categories, including those engaged in non-employment activities without benefits (e.g., full-time family care) and those employed outside the Belgian social security system (e.g., posted workers, cross-border workers, employees of supranational organisations, informal workers). We use longitudinal data on the socio-economic status as an alternative indicator of posted workers' settlement intentions.

The final dataset enables us to track simultaneously workers' posting patterns and their migration trajectories over time. In this article, we focus on EU citizen posted workers and exclude non-EU citizen posted workers, as the latter do not benefit from free movement and typically require a residence permit – whether for work or other reasons – to settle in an EU member state. We note however that the posting of non-EU citizens to Belgium, and across Europe more broadly, has risen sharply in recent years (Lens et al., 2022a). Due to the limited follow-up period in our dataset for recent posting cohorts, we do not analyse their migration patterns in this article, but we consider this an important avenue for future research.

Empirical findings

Our empirical analysis of the interaction between posting and free movement migration is structured as follows. First, we describe the characteristics of the posted workers. Second, we examine how they engage with the Belgian labour market through posting. Third, we investigate whether and when they exhibit patterns of settlement before and especially after their posting experience. Finally, we analyse which posting patterns and demographic characteristics are associated with a higher likelihood of eventual settlement.

Characteristics of posted workers

We begin our empirical analysis by describing the characteristics of our analytical sample. We select EU citizens posted to Belgium between 2010 and 2020, covering approximately 83,605 unique workers. Table 1 summarises their key demographics.

Posted workers are predominantly male (95%), with an average age of 38 years at the start of their first posting. The majority (60%) hold citizenship from EU14⁹ countries, while a smaller proportion (27%) originate from EU10¹⁰ countries, and even fewer (13%) from EU3¹¹ countries. Regarding employment

⁹ EU14 refers to the countries that made up the EU before 2004, excluding Belgium: Denmark, Germany, Ireland, Greece, Spain, France, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Austria, Portugal, Finland, Sweden and United Kingdom.

¹⁰ EU10 refers to the countries that joined the EU in 2004: Poland, Czech Republic, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovenia, Estonia, Slovakia, Hungary, Cyprus and Malta.

¹¹ EU3 refers to the countries that joined the EU in 2007 and 2013: Romania, Bulgaria and Croatia.

type, most workers are posted as employees (87%) rather than self-employed (13%). The construction sector notably accounts for almost half (44%) of all posted workers, reflecting the broader EU-wide pattern of high cross-border labour mobility within this industry. The distribution of posted workers across Belgium indicates that Flanders attracts the highest proportion (57%), followed by Wallonia (18%) and Brussels (9%), reflecting regional labour demand patterns and sectoral distributions.

Comparing the demographics of posted workers with those of standard EU migrants residing in Belgium during the same period reveals significant differences. Posted workers are notably older on average and significantly more male-dominated. A higher proportion have EU10 citizenship. Additionally, posted workers are more concentrated in the construction sector and have a lower rate of self-employment. While Flanders is a key destination for posting, EU migrants tend to be more evenly distributed across Belgian regions, with greater concentration in Brussels.

The distinct demographic profile of posted workers, particularly their older age and lower education levels¹², suggests they face greater migration barriers (e.g., language difficulties) than conventional migrants (Arnholtz & Lillie, 2023). Posting may thus represent a more accessible route for them to work in other European labour markets.

Table 1. Posted workers have distinct demographic profiles compared to standard migrants

	<i>Posted workers</i>	<i>Standard migrants</i>
Age	38	30
% Male	95	54
% EU14 citizen	60	73
% EU10 citizen	27	12
% EU3 citizen	13	15
% Working in construction	44	12
% Working as self-employed	13	17
% Working in Flanders	57	36
% Working in Brussels	9	41
% Working in Wallonia	18	23
% Working in multiple regions	15	-

Notes: This table summarizes demographic and employment characteristics of posted workers and standard migrants in Belgium. Demographics for migrants come from the Belgian Labour Force Survey 2010-2020. Migrants are defined as working-age EU citizens who live in Belgium and who are active in the labour market (either employed or unemployed). For posted workers, all demographics are measured in the year of the first posting mission. For migrants, all characteristics are measured at the time of the survey, except for age, which is the age at which they arrived in Belgium.

¹² Unfortunately, the LIMOSA dataset does not provide information on the educational level or occupation of posted workers, only their sector of activity. However, Muñoz (2024) finds that in France, only 2% of posted workers hold managerial positions, compared to 30% of standard migrants. It is reasonable to assume that a similar pattern applies to Belgium.

Posting patterns and engagement with the Belgian labour market

After describing the demographic characteristics of posted workers, we now examine their mobility patterns and engagement with the Belgian labour market through posting. These patterns offer valuable insights into the likelihood of eventual settlement, as different posting trajectories reflect varying degrees of labour market attachment.

The frequency of postings varies significantly across workers (Table 2). While 34% of workers experience only a single posting mission, indicating limited attachment, 30% return for two to three postings, suggesting some degree of recurrent engagement. Meanwhile, 35% of workers have four or more postings, demonstrating a stronger and more sustained labour market connection.

Beyond the number of postings, the total *cumulative* duration of postings highlights the extent to which workers engage with the Belgian labour market over time. 39% of workers spend less than three months in total, reflecting only brief and temporary employment. Another 30% remain posted for a medium-term period between three and twelve months, while 31% accumulate more than a full year of posting activity, suggesting a deeper labour market integration.

Another important dimension of labour market attachment is the number of years in which workers are actively posted. Nearly half (48%) are posted only within a single calendar year, indicating short-lived engagement. In contrast, 33% maintain ties for two to three years, reflecting more sustained but still temporary mobility, while 19% remain active for four years or more, demonstrating a long-term and recurrent engagement with the Belgian labour market.

The number of different foreign employers a posted worker has over time serves as an indicator of employment stability. Workers who are repeatedly posted by the same employer are more likely to experience greater job continuity, while those who change employers frequently may face more flexible work arrangements. Most workers (69%) remain with a single employer, suggesting stable relationships with their sending firm. Another 17% have worked for two different employers, while 14% have worked for three or more employers.

In addition to employer continuity, the number of different Belgian clients a worker serves offers insights into the structure of posting assignments. Repeated placements with the same client suggest stronger workplace integration. The majority, 72%, are posted to a single client. Another 16% work for two different clients, while 12% provide services to three or more Belgian clients, indicating greater mobility across workplaces.

Taken together, these findings reveal a polarized pattern in posting trajectories. While many posted workers participate in temporary, short-term assignments and engage with Belgium only briefly, a notable subset returns frequently, accumulates sustained employment over time, and remains active in the posting system for several years. These findings align with qualitative research on the “stickiness” of posting and the existence of “posting careers” (Caro et al., 2015; Sippola & Kall, 2016). Repeated exposure to the Belgian labour market may create opportunities to transition from postings to regular migration.

At the same time, it remains unclear whether these workers are also posted to other countries beyond Belgium. Muñoz (2024) shows that in France, half of posted workers in a given year are also sent to other countries by their employer. A high frequency of postings across multiple destinations would make it difficult for workers to pursue or achieve permanent settlement in one country (Berntsen, 2016). This raises an important question: do recurrent postings in Belgium reflect gradual steps toward settlement, or are they part of a broader transnational labour mobility strategy? In the next section, we empirically

examine how these posting patterns shape the likelihood of posted workers transitioning to permanent residence in Belgium.

Table 2. A divided workforce – some posted workers engage briefly, while others have long-term posting careers in Belgium

<i>Measure</i>	<i>Category</i>	<i>% of Workers</i>
Number of posting jobs	1 posting job	34
	2–3 posting jobs	30
	4+ posting jobs	35
Total cumulative posting duration	≤3 months total	39
	4–12 months total	30
	More than 12 months total	32
Years active in posting	Single-year engagement	48
	Medium-term engagement (2–3 years)	33
	Long-term engagement (4+ years)	19
Number of foreign employers	1 employer	69
	2 employers	17
	3+ employers	14
Number of Belgian clients	1 client	37
	2 clients	8
	3+ clients	6
	No client	48

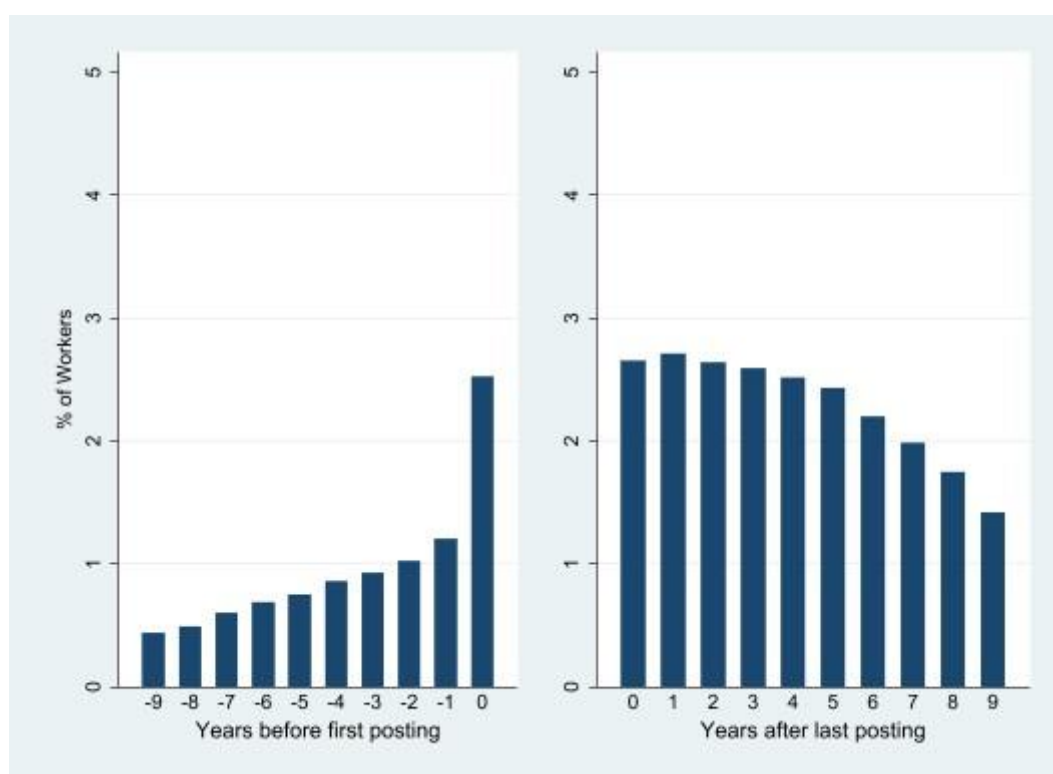
Notes: This table summarises key measures of posted workers' engagement with the Belgian labour market between 2010 and 2020. The number of posting jobs captures the total count of distinct posting missions per worker. Cumulative posting duration refers to the total time spent posted in Belgium, aggregated across all assignments. Years active in posting reflects the number of calendar years in which a worker had at least one active posting. Number of foreign employers indicates the total number of distinct sending firms that posted a worker, while number of Belgian clients measures the number of different Belgian firms that received their services.

Migration patterns and settlement in Belgium

This section examines whether and when posted workers transition from temporary mobility to more permanent migration. We first explore whether posted workers exhibit signs of settlement before and after their posting experience by analysing changes in their residence status and socio-economic status over time.

Figure 2 examines the residency status of posted workers before and after their first and last posting events. Before their first posting, very few workers (less than 1%) hold Belgian residence, with only a marginal increase in residence rates in the years leading up to the first posting event. At the time of their first posting, a small fraction (2.5%) formalise residence in Belgium, though the vast majority remain non-residents. Following the last posting event, the proportion of residents remains relatively stable at around 2.5% for a few years, suggesting that some workers maintain their transition from posted workers to resident migrant workers. After five years, the share of residents begins to decline. This pattern suggests that for most posted workers, residence in Belgium remains temporary, with only a limited share transitioning into long-term migrants.

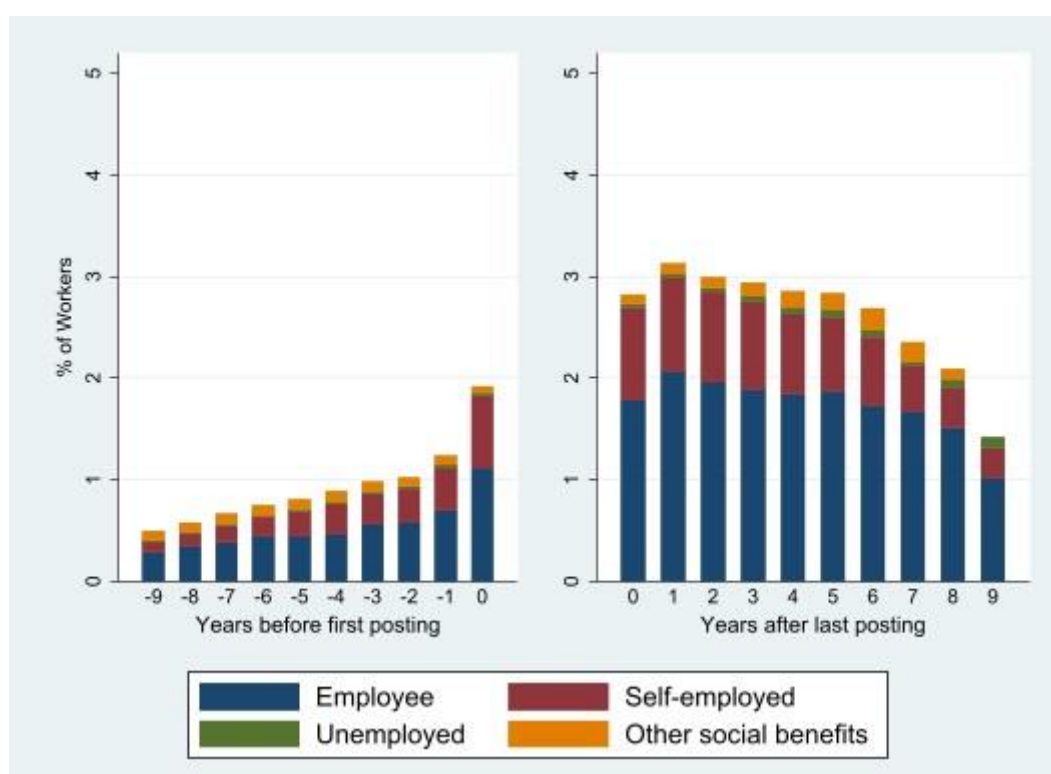
Figure 2. Very few posted workers settle in Belgium after their posting experience



Notes: The figure shows the percentage of workers residing in Belgium in the years before their first posting (left panel) and after their last posting (right panel). The sample includes individuals whose first posting occurred between 2011 and 2019 and those whose last posting took place between 2010 and 2018. The sample composition changes over time: for the first posting, later cohorts can be observed for a longer pre-posting period than earlier cohorts. Similarly, for the last posting, only those who exited earlier can be observed for the full post-posting period.

To further assess the extent to which posted workers transition into longer-term residence in Belgium, we examine their socio-economic status before and after their first and last posting events (Figure 3). This indicator captures whether workers become locally employed, self-employed, or receive Belgian social security benefits. The results closely mirror the residence status analysis. Prior to the first posting, the vast majority of workers have no recorded socio-economic status in Belgium. At the moment of the first posting, the share of workers employed in Belgium or receiving social benefits increases to 2%. This share accumulates slightly over time, reaching nearly 3% by the last posting event. However, as with residence status, the pattern is one of temporary attachment: the proportion of workers with Belgian social security ties remains stable for a few years after their last posting event but begins to decline after six years.

Figure 3. Posted workers who do settle in Belgium tend to remain in employment



Notes: The figure presents the distribution of socio-economic status among posted workers in the years before their first posting (left panel) and after their last posting (right panel). The sample includes individuals whose first posting occurred between 2011 and 2019 and those whose last posting took place between 2010 and 2018. The sample composition changes over time: for the first posting, later cohorts can be observed for a longer pre-posting period than earlier cohorts. Similarly, for the last posting, only those who exited earlier can be observed for the full post-posting period.

Together, these findings demonstrate that posting is rarely a stepping stone to permanent migration. Only a very small share of workers develop long-term residency or social security ties to Belgium. There is some evidence of integration in the immediate aftermath of posting though, particularly through employment. Looking at sectoral data for workers who transition to a local employee contract, we find that most remain in the sector in which they were originally posted. The top sectors include specialized construction activities (20%), temporary agency work (13%), manufacture of fabricated metal products (6%), wholesale trade (6%), manufacture of food products (5%), and construction of buildings (5%). The role of temporary agency work as a pathway from posting to local employment aligns with qualitative evidence (Berntsen, 2015; Caro et al., 2015; Sippola & Kall, 2016; Wagner, 2015).

Variation in migration patterns by posting histories and worker characteristics

In the final part of our analysis, we examine the heterogeneity in settlement probabilities among posted workers. Using a logistic regression model, we estimate the likelihood of a posted worker settling in Belgium in the years following their last posting, considering a range of posting and worker characteristics as explanatory variables.

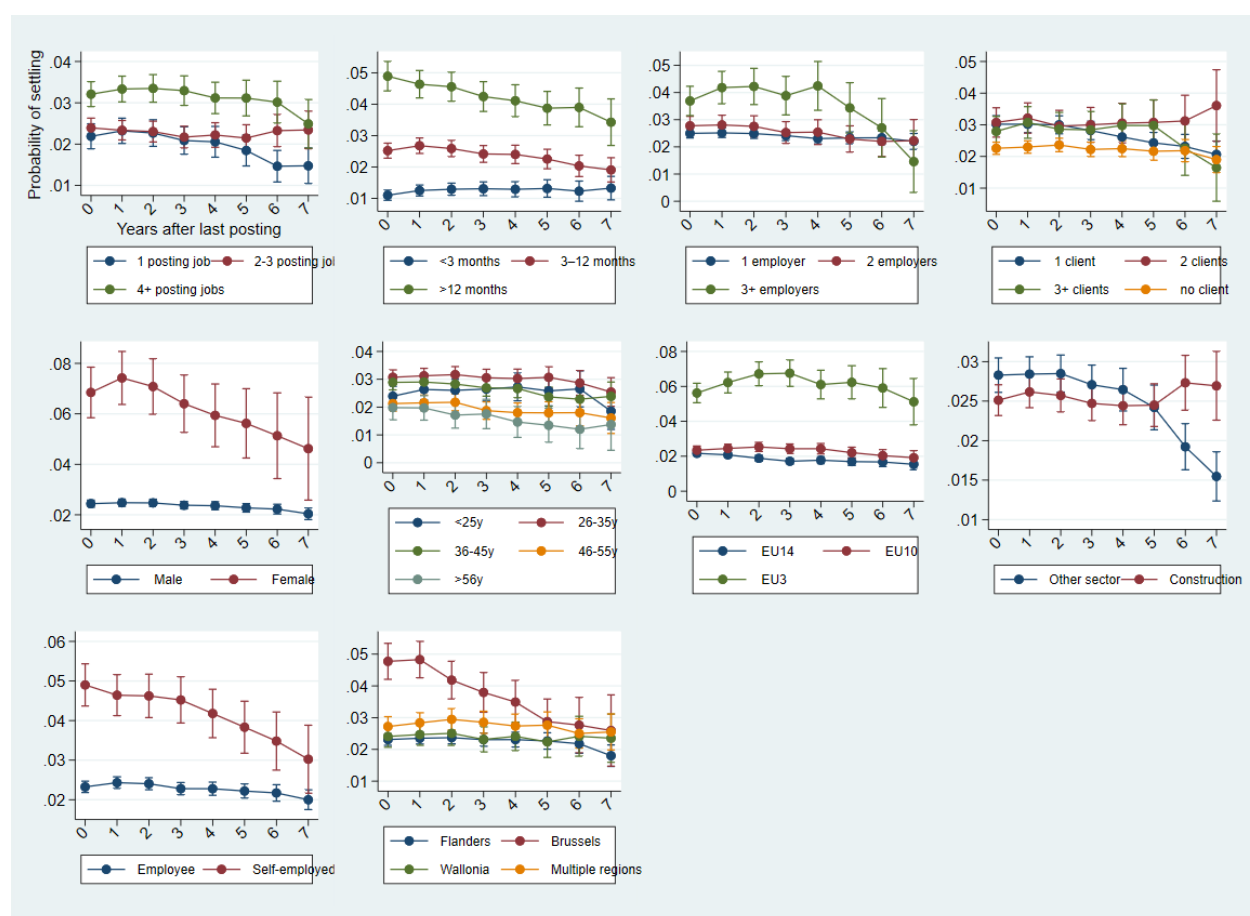
Our results, displayed in Figure 4 reveal substantial variation in settlement probabilities. Workers with a history of four or more postings are significantly more likely to settle in Belgium than those with fewer postings. Workers with longer cumulative posting periods have a much higher probability of settlement

than those with shorter stays. Workers who have been posted by three or more employers are far more likely to settle than those with fewer. By contrast, the effect of Belgian clients is less pronounced – though workers who never had a direct Belgian client are least likely to settle.

Beyond posting histories, individual worker characteristics significantly shape settlement probabilities. Female workers are more likely to settle in Belgium than their male counterparts. Younger workers are more likely to settle than older workers, with the highest probabilities observed among those aged 26-35 and 36-45. Workers from EU3 countries have the highest probability of settlement, significantly exceeding that of workers from EU14 and EU10 countries. Working in construction does not have a clear effect on settlement probabilities compared to other industries. However, self-employed workers are far more likely to settle than employees. Lastly, posted workers in Brussels are substantially more likely to settle than those in Flanders or Wallonia.

Overall, these findings suggest that frequent and longer postings for multiple foreign employers substantially increase the likelihood of settlement. Additionally, settlement is more common among younger, female, and self-employed workers, as well as those posted in Brussels. Citizenship plays a significant role, with workers from EU3 countries being far more likely to transition into long-term residence. However, despite these differences, predicted probabilities of settlement remain low across all groups, reinforcing the finding that posting rarely leads to permanent migration.

Figure 4. Who stays? Settlement probabilities differ among posted workers



Notes: Predicted probabilities are based on a logistic regression model estimating the likelihood of residence in Belgium, with an interaction between years since the last posting and key posting and demographic characteristics. The sample includes individuals whose last posting event occurred between 2010 and 2018. However, the sample size decreases over time, as only earlier cohorts (e.g., those with a last posting in 2010-2012) can be observed for

the full seven-year period. Controls include the number of postings, total posting duration, unique employers and clients, sex, age, citizenship, construction sector, self-employment status, region of work, and year of last posting. Standard errors are clustered at the worker level

Discussion and conclusion

Each year, millions of posted workers move across Europe. Posting has become the primary channel of temporary intra-European labour mobility. That raises the question: is posting a phenomenon that stands entirely apart from free movement migration or is there a connection? Do many posted workers eventually transition into migrant workers? This question has remained largely unanswered. This paper is the first to investigate this issue using comprehensive administrative data for Belgium, one of the most important receiving countries for posted workers in Europe in relative and even absolute terms.

Our analysis reveals that very few posted workers ultimately become permanent residents. While a significant share remains in the destination country for extended periods, the transition from posting to settlement migration is highly exceptional. Our main finding is one of “lasting temporariness” (Grzymała-Kazłowska, 2005): there is little interaction between posting and free movement migration.

It is an old truism that “there is nothing more permanent than temporary foreign workers” (Martin, 2001). In one sense our results bear this out. Many posted workers engage in multiple postings over long periods, frequently returning over the span of several years. But they rarely stay.

Several forces may be at work here. Employers’ have a strong interest in keeping cheap and hyper-flexible labour available. Posting’s popularity with European employers has been explained against the background of the hiring and firing rigidities characteristic of many European labour markets in addition to high labour costs. From the worker’s side, posting as a relatively less regulated and certainly less monitored form of labour creates the opportunity to make a lot of money in short bouts of time while maintaining a connection to the origin country. As Caro et al. (2015) note, “*many of the workers we talked to had been working within this pan-European labour market for years, and some seemed to be making a career of it*”. These mechanisms too can explain the permanence of temporary posting. However, it is unclear if other forces are at work here: maybe we should not overestimate the agency of posted workers. It is likely that posted workers are too disconnected from the host country society to truly develop interest and capacity to become really part of it and choose for settlement migration.

From a receiving country perspective, our findings seem to be a ‘dream scenario’. Scholars have argued before that from a policy perspective, a certain tension exists when it comes to migration: countries have a need for foreign labour due to structural shortages in their labour markets. On the other hand, these same countries prefer not to have to bear the cost of integration of the worker and his or her family in the long run. From that perspective, posting may be viewed by receiving countries as a flexible way to import foreign labour while limiting the number of benefits and rights granted to temporary migrants. In fact, posting takes this logic even further, by fully outsourcing foreign workers’ legal employment and supervision to the employer located abroad. The main thing that host countries lose, is a sizeable amount of social security contributions and taxes. On the other hand, the host country need not worry about integration issues of the workers and their family, an advantage that governments seem to have understood. As Perocco (2018) has put it: “*The demand for outsourcing and subcontracting on one hand and the demand for temporary work on the other, have found in migrant workers and posted workers the ideal combination to have a just-in-time “zero waste” workforce, to extract value from migrant workers while eliminating the restrictions and social costs deriving from their establishing roots in the country, without having to pay the so-called “immigration costs”*”. Policy makers in European countries

prefer “birds of passage”, birds that work hard and contribute to the host country’s economy without becoming a burden whatsoever. Our data show that posting mobility corresponds perfectly to this solution of a cheap, forever temporary work force.

From the worker’s perspective, however, our conclusion may be less rosy. Posting mobility is notorious for its propensity to social fraud and worker exploitation. Posting represents the ‘bottom’ of the labour market hierarchy (Arnholtz & Lillie, 2023) and is technically not even part of it. Despite policies and directives at the European level to address this vulnerability, the propensity for fraud and exploitation remains problematically high, as ample literature has demonstrated. At the same time, posted workers have agency. Many may actually prefer this form of mobility, where they maintain a strong link with their home country while making the most of their comparative advantage, so to say. This makes posting a complex issue to tackle.

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