
Guest editorial: State policies and regulations towards migrant work in times of, and beyond, the COVID-19 pandemic

Guest editorial

293

Introduction

During the COVID-19-pandemic, a fundamental concern across countries in Europe was how to guarantee a continuous supply of workers, especially in those sectors considered “key” for the functioning of the economy and society. While the definition of these essential sectors slightly varied across countries, many of them could be defined as secondary segments of the labour market, characterized by precarious and flexible conditions of work and employing a significant number of migrant workers [1] (European Commission, 2020b; Fasani and Mazza, 2020). Therefore, an important dilemma faced by governments across Europe was how to recompose the need for migrant labour and thus the need for continued mobility of deemed “key” workers on the one hand, with the protection of public health and thus with measures such as lock-down restrictions and border closures to curb within-country and across-country mobility, on the other hand.

Governments across Europe addressed these tensions by resorting to “emergency” policies and interventions. Where borders closed and new borders were set up to prevent the virus from spreading, mobility and migration of labour within and across state lines was both restricted and enhanced. When air traffic came to an almost complete stop all over the world, the Austrian government arranged to fly in migrant care workers nonetheless. Despite lockdowns, an air bridge between Germany and Rumania was established, so that Rumanian workers could be flown in for the German asparagus harvest. Similarly, in the United Kingdom (UK), “emergency arrangements” were applied to the mobility of European Union (EU) workers in agriculture and farming. These policies clearly highlighted the extent to which many countries in Europe rely on migrant labour and the important contribution of migrants for national labour markets, despite decades of increasing anti-immigration rhetoric and restrictive migration policies, especially in the first phases of the pandemic, the contribution of “key” workers, among which many migrants, acquired public visibility and appreciation. Nonetheless, attention to the needs and conditions of these workers, in terms of protections of their labour and social rights and of their health, including access to care, received far less attention (Mantu, 2022; Szelewa and Polakowski, 2022) and differed on the basis of their migration status (documented/undocumented) and category of entry (e.g. EU mobile workers; refugees; posted workers; student workers; TCN workers), creating narrowly defined divides between “insiders” and “outsiders”.

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The management of the “emergency” reaffirmed the centrality of the State after decades of de-regularization and privatization trends in various policy domains (Koinova *et al.*, 2023). During the crisis, it was the State which had ultimate responsibility to govern and secure availability of migrant labour in the public and private sectors of the labour market. It was the State that had ultimate responsibility in terms of public health with extraordinary degrees of interventions in this field. It was also the State that was called to create and extend economic and welfare protections for its citizens in a period of critical economic disruption. These interventions were clearly and explicitly designed to protect national interests and citizens, leaving migrants more exposed than domestic workers to economic, social and health risks during the pandemic even when their (risky) work was deemed essential for the functioning of the national economy and society.

This special issue looks into this contradiction by analysing both State’s policies to secure “key” migrant labour and its influence in regulating the working conditions of migrant workers in different sectors and countries. It analyses the interaction between (non)existing, emerging, changing or conflicting State policies and regulations in times of and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic and their direct and indirect influence on labour market entry, employment opportunities and conditions for labour migrants. The different contributions highlight how States’ crisis responses ensured continued mobility and availability of “key” workers over precautionary responses to protect those same workers that perform the “essential” jobs. The issue also discusses the neglect for the position of migrant workers in State’s crisis responses and its impact on the conditions of work for migrants in various industries. Yet, the issue also discusses States’ attempts to intervene to improve conditions of migrant work, whose lack of protection became more evident precisely because of the pandemic. Still, also in times of crisis, the State’s impact on migrant labour is greatly influenced by pre-existing institutional settings, conditions, policies and regulations in different domains and governance levels. As the issues’ contributions highlight, in fact, the work of migrants in industries that are under minimal enforcement or control of State authorities remained to a large extent beyond the State’s reach, also during a pandemic.

Conditions of employment for low-waged migrant workers: structures and regulations

The literature widely underlines how migrant workers tend to be overrepresented in low-paid and precarious jobs (Datta *et al.*, 2007; Pulignano *et al.*, 2015; Reich, 2008), performing monotonous or physically demanding work (Fitzgerald and Hardy, 2010) for which they are often overqualified (MacKenzie and Forde, 2007). Women in particular tend to be incorporated into gender segregated and “cheapest” labour market sectors such as domestic and care work (Anderson, 2000; Kofman, 2012) where they risk being highly dependent on employers, especially if they remain undocumented (Anderson, 2000). The level of segmentation of the labour market in the host countries has also been used to explain migrants’ segregation in jobs at the bottom of the occupational structure (Massey and Hirst, 1998). Migrants tend to accept bad pay and working conditions since they are still favourable if compared to those in their countries of origin (Piore, 1979). This is particularly the case when migrants consider such work as temporary (Curtis and Lucas, 2001) or their choice is constrained by an uncertain migratory, financial or legal status (Anderson, 2010; McDowell *et al.*, 2009). However, aspirations may change over time, especially following a more permanent settlement in the host country (Knocke, 2000; Piore, 1979). Migrants might also use temporary jobs strategically to improve their language ability or to support themselves while training for a specific occupation (Alberti, 2014).

While there are similarities in migrant work across countries, differences exist in the extent of migrant labour and in migrants’ work and living conditions. The labour market

segmentation literature, in fact, underlines how the interplay of different regulatory processes and institutions affect the extent of labour migration by shaping the context in which labour market actors make their choices (Peck, 1996; Ruhs and Anderson, 2010; Marino and Keizer, 2022). Anderson (2012, p. 47), in particular, proposes the idea of a “system effect” which “originates from the interaction between institutional and regulatory frameworks, wider public policies (e.g., welfare and social policies), and the social context where job status and the gendered nature of work are important factors”. In this view, the State has a fundamental role in shaping the types of labour shortages (domestic versus migrant) as well as employers’ choices and workers’ behaviour. This role of the State has also been underlined within political economy and industrial relations analyses (McGovern, 2007; MacKenzie and Forde, 2009). MacKenzie and Forde (2009), for instance, stress that savings associated with employing migrant workers do not only benefit employers, but might be also a direct interest of the State which redistributes the costs of labour reproduction onto external social systems. In their view, this would explain not only State engagement in active recruitment strategies to attract migrant workers but also the nature of migration and integration policies (Castles and Miller, 2009; Morris, 2003).

Among the components of the regulatory system, State migration policies have been widely considered fundamental determinants of international migration although their efficacy has been contested in recent decades (Castles, 2004; De Haas, 2007; Czaika and De Haas, 2011). Their influence on employers’ preferences has been underlined within political economy and industrial relations analyses (McGovern, 2007; MacKenzie and Forde, 2009; Menz, 2009; Caviedes, 2010). However, the persistent increase of recent intra-European migration in some specific countries, in the context of the European framework of free mobility, cannot be explained by national level migration policies alone.

Observed differences across countries have been explained according to specific characteristics of the national regulatory frameworks (Marino *et al.*, 2017) or of the “varieties of capitalism” (Hall and Soskice, 2001). Menz (2009), for instance, stresses how a specific variety of capitalism – characterized by a particular organization of factors such as production systems, production strategies, vocational and training systems – shape employers’ (and trade unions’) preferences in relation to more liberal or restrictive migration policies. Similarly, Wickham and Bruff (2008) argue that employers’ recruitment strategies are determined by the mutual interaction between the system of production and employment on the one hand and the system of education and training on the other hand. Finally, supranational regulation, as in the case of the European-level regulation, also provides resources and constraints to employers, which affects national industrial relations systems (Lillie and Greer, 2007) and creates different State regulatory responses to develop and govern national labour markets (Lillie, 2012; Wagner, 2015). It has been underlined, for instance, how the ambiguous rule system surrounding the EU posting of workers has allowed employers to avoid regulation and access cheap labour from low-wage countries through transnational subcontracting arrangements (Berntsen and Lillie, 2015; Wagner, 2015; Arnholtz and Lillie, 2020).

Some scholars (e.g. Raess and Burgoon, 2015; Ruhs and Anderson, 2010) have further highlighted the centrality of employers’ preferences for migrant workers to explain the parallel increase, in the last 15 years or so, of low-paid economic migration and the flexibilization of the labour market of the receiving countries. According to these scholars, these two phenomena would be in a causal circular relationship: employers’ demand for migrant workers would increase the availability of migrants in the labour market and this in turn would allow employers to continue offering poor pay and working conditions. The presence of such a circular relationship between (rising) migration and (rising) labour market flexibility across EU countries has been confirmed by some empirical analysis (Alsos and Eldring, 2008; Raess and Burgoon, 2015; McCollum and Findlay, 2015) and has been used to

explain the increasing reliance on migrant labour in specific sectors (e.g. social care, agriculture and constructions) across countries.

Yet, as mentioned above, the extent of migrant labour as well as the conditions of migrant workers in the host labour markets are not fixed, but amenable to change, depending on the regulatory environment and power dynamics between actors (Krings, 2021; Arnholtz, 2022). The State has a fundamental role in shaping the extent of migrant labour and the conditions of migrant work, therefore supporting or limiting employers demand for migrant workers. This can be done directly, for instance, through more liberal migration policies, migrants' recruitment programs or temporary migration scheme (see for examples the Finnish student visa regulations or the Japanese technical intern training visa program in this issue), which usually restrict workers' immediate access to social security schemes and/or make these conditional on the workers' contribution (Anderson, 2010). However, this could also be achieved by constraining employers' behaviours by means of more overall regulation, monitoring and inspections and in low-waged flexible sectors specifically.

COVID-19 as critical juncture to improve conditions of work for migrants

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated many longstanding and structural socio-economic inequalities, with disproportionate effects for those who already lived precarious lives before the pandemic (Fasani and Mazza, 2020; Guadagno, 2020; Rose-Redwood *et al.*, 2020). While existing substandard conditions of employment and housing of migrant workers were brought to the public and political eye, the migrants also became appreciated for the previously unacknowledged vital contribution they make to host labour markets (Anderson *et al.*, 2021). The systemic reliance on migrant labour in specific (often secondary) segments of the labour market became undeniable, for instance in care (Van Hooren, 2020; Schilliger *et al.*, 2022) or agriculture (Palumbo and Corrado, 2020). However, the extent and distribution of the migrant workforce between sectors and countries differed, reflecting existing pre-pandemic differences (Fasani and Mazza, 2020).

The (supra-)national emergency policies related to migrant workers, notably in the first phase of the pandemic, were meant to safeguard the continuous supply of "key" migrant workers, with little regard for the protection of those same workers (European Commission, 2020a; Rasnaca, 2020). Mantu (2022, p. 22) concludes that the need to protect migrant workers was acknowledged in the overall EU response only after large-scale COVID outbreaks concerned migrant workers. Yet, the EU recommendations made to protect these workers were minimal and based solely on soft law (Mantu, 2022). The EU's call upon Member States to improve labour inspections to protect migrants from poor work and living conditions resonates poorly with the already known inadequate enforcement capacity of State institutions regarding many forms of migrant work (Arnholtz and Lillie, 2020; Heindlmaier and Kobler, 2022).

The pandemic thus called the State to cover, at least formally, a dual role regarding migrant labour: on the one hand, States needed to ensure a continued accessible pool of workers for "key" jobs, whereas on the other hand, States needed to improve the protection of migrant workers, who occupied vital roles in the functioning of labour markets. States attempts to cover this dual role as **facilitator** and **protector** were apparent across nation States as the papers in this special issue show.

In agri- and horti-culture, the State's role as a facilitator during the pandemic was particularly obvious in order to mitigate labour shortages that threatened the seasonal harvesting season. Several EU Member States extended the length of short-term work permits or temporarily lifted restrictions on work for people already in the country (EMN, 2020). Belgium and Finland, for instance, suspended the waiting period asylum seekers had to respect before start working so that they could take up an essential job (including seasonal

work) immediately after their asylum claim was processed (EMN, 2020, p. 18). Spain extended the work permits for migrants whose authorization expired in the first six months after the pandemic broke out (EMN, 2020, p. 19). In France, migrant care workers were fast-tracked for naturalization to recognize and reward the workers' commitment, solidarity and generosity to the French nation state during the pandemic (Wilsher, 2020; Isaac and Elrick, 2021). Portugal offered migrants with pending cases temporary residency for the duration of the national state of emergency (Mazzilli, 2022). Italy adopted a regularization program for undocumented workers already present in the country's agriculture or domestic care sectors to stem the acute labour shortages in the agri-food industry, when the pandemic and travel restrictions prevented the arrival of many care and seasonal harvest workers from abroad (PICUM, 2020, 2021). The powerful agricultural lobby persuaded the German state to allow seasonal workers, mostly from Romania, in to safeguard the asparagus harvest, despite lockdown measures (Küppers, 2021).

Some countries also eased COVID-related travel restrictions for seasonal workers: in Poland, the mandatory quarantine period was cancelled for these workers; and Finland took precautionary measures to allow seasonal workers to start their job immediately upon arrival (EMN, 2020, p. 19). Similar lifting or easing of COVID-related restrictions happened in other essential sectors, such as care (Pandey *et al.*, 2021; Schilliger *et al.*, 2022). The State's considerations to take policy measures or relax COVID-19 regulations to facilitate continued availability of migrant workers were clearly economically motivated. Schilliger *et al.* (2022, p. 13) quote a State official who justifies the quarantine-exemptions for live-in care workers from Poland and Slovakia precisely because of the migrants' fulfilment of Switzerland's need for their professional skills. The State official continued to state, however, that the migrant care workers' "contact with the local population should be avoided as much as possible". Again, the workers were welcomed for their critical economic contribution, yet with little or no consideration for their well-being. In fact, the State called for observance of COVID-19 safety measures to protect the Swiss population from these workers. In other words, these workers were paradoxically treated as "expendable, yet at the same time essential workers" and placed by the State in the "contradictory position of being symbolically categorized as essential but made to be treated as indispensable and undervalued workers" (Pandey *et al.*, 2021, p. 1288).

While many States sponsored COVID-related support measures, such as job-retention or unemployment schemes, these were hardly accessible to migrants, either because of the temporary nature of their stays in the country or the (often linked) precarious and temporary nature of their employment contracts. The lack of access to unemployment and sickness benefits for migrants, self-employed and other non-standard workers has been raised as particularly problematic, due to the subsequent impact on people's health and their jobs and income status (Purkayastha *et al.*, 2021; Spasova *et al.*, 2021; Danaj *et al.*, 2023). In response to government support schemes that failed to include particular groups of migrant workers, local governance and community initiatives stepped in to support the urgent needs of migrants, as they did in Japan for instance (see Milly, 2023). NGOs and civil society organizations also played an important role to fight for better State protection of migrants, through campaigns, lobby or judicial proceedings (Koinova *et al.*, 2023). If not, migrants were left to fend for themselves, by switching jobs or taking up different work tasks, to avoid the detrimental effects of job loss, as Ndomo *et al.* (2023) illustrates through biographical interviews with highly educated African migrants in Finland.

After the first pandemic "emergency" phase, the apparent vulnerable situation of migrant workers became part of some State initiatives towards more structural improvements. The pandemic was even regarded as potential critical juncture to push through policy change to structurally improve the conditions of migrant work, also beyond the COVID pandemic (see Berntsen *et al.*, 2023). Some even speak of a "COVID moment" that could "reinforce political will to take the difficult initiatives needed" (Crouch, 2022, p. 32), which States tended to

postpone or “ignore” before because of the complex nature of the underlying issues, which were not as publicly visible before the pandemic (Boswell and Badenhop, 2021; Berntsen *et al.*, 2023).

One of the most notable examples of State intervention in its role as a “protector” of migrant workers was the ban on subcontracting and temporary agency work in the German meat industry. While re-regulation of the German meat industry was advocated for by a coalition of trade unions, churches and NGOs for years on end, the pandemic finally created momentum for institutional change (Erol and Schulten, 2021; Ban *et al.*, 2022). It was the spill-over effect of massive COVID-19 outbreaks among migrant subcontracted workers towards the wider local community (with local towns being put in quarantine) that motivated the German State to step-in and issue a legal ban on subcontracted and temporary agency work. The lack of protection the workers faced because of how their work was organized, not only hurt the workers during the pandemic, but created a broader public health threat (Ban *et al.*, 2022). After the ban, workers needed to be employed on direct work contracts with the meat companies instead, making the meat company directly responsible for the working conditions of the workers and bringing the workers in closer reach of State enforcement.

Besides the acute labour shortages, public health concerns also played a role in State interventions, such as the State regularization that Italy adopted during the pandemic (see Vergnano, 2023). While the adoption of the initiative was motivated by a wish to improve the work and health conditions of undocumented workers in agriculture and domestic work, Vergnano shows that the practical implementation of the regularization, however, hardly improved the position of the workers concerned. In fact, very few numbers of workers managed to regularize their status, and in practice, administrative requirements fed exploitative practices, especially since the application procedures could only be started by the employer of the migrant that applied for regularization. This confirms existing literature that highlights that regularization does not automatically entail improved working conditions for the workers involved (Bansak and Pearlman, 2021) or structurally solves the issue of informal migrant work as many regularizations are limited in scope and duration (European Commission, 2020c; González Beilfuss and Koopmans, 2021).

Public and political concerns about migrants’ lack of healthcare access prompted many States to ensure migrants’ healthcare access regardless of migration status during the COVID-19 pandemic (WHO, 2021). In the Czech Republic, a consortium of NGOs working with migrants urged the Czech State to make the healthcare system more inclusive and accessible for migrants and their children (Gheorghiev, 2023). However, initiatives taken during the pandemic, through the creation of a commercial insurance monopoly for migrants, increased migrants’ healthcare premiums, thus worsening their care access (*ibid.*). Many States struggle to improve effective healthcare access for migrants, not only during the pandemic, due to among others, language and cultural barriers (WHO, 2021).

What is holding State’s back in taking concerted efforts to protect migrant workers more effectively is the gradually deteriorated functioning of State institutions to reach and protect migrants already before the pandemic broke out (Arnholz and Lillie, 2020; Heindlmaier and Kobler, 2022). Effective State intervention to bring migrants back under the protective scope of the State, therefore, requires fundamental changes in existing State regulations and policies, combined with altering the operation of monitoring and enforcement institutions (Berntsen *et al.*, 2023). Only in this way, States can work to tilt the balance of power back and away from the dominance of employers’ demand for “cheap” yet essential migrant labour and protect migrants from detrimental working conditions. Yet, as known from the literature discussed above, the extent and effect of State’s protective role for migrant workers depends importantly on the power dynamics between institutional actors and the level of support existing institutional arrangements provide for State’s interventions in the labour market, leaving some States better equipped as protector than others (see also Gheorghiev, 2023).

Conclusions

The pandemic confirmed the effective role that States maintain in facilitating and restraining migrant labour across national boundaries (see also [Koinova et al., 2023](#)) to meet employers' "needs" which in general are considered to support the economic interests of the country at large. Yet, the pandemic also exposed the State's delays and inactivity in protecting migrant workers, especially in the lower segments of the labour market. During the pandemic, in fact, several countries in Europe ensured the availability of migrant labour through relaxed emergency migration restrictions, and allowed seasonal workers to be flown in, granted residency statuses for the duration of the pandemic emergency, regularized undocumented migrant workers, expedited the lifting of work restrictions to free up migrant labour potential and fast-tracked naturalization applications. These were short-term and selective State measures, many only taken for the duration of the pandemic emergency, that did little to change the systematic issues related to the (exploitative) conditions of migrant work. Instead, they often deepened existing inequalities since the granting of entrance and/or stay only applied to specific groups of migrant workers depending on the demand for their labour in specific sectors and therefore on migrants' position within the labour market.

The pandemic thus exposed and deepened the tension between the need for, and contribution of, migrant workers on the one hand and the State's inefficacy, if not disinterest, to provide migrant workers with decent terms and conditions of work and employment, on the other hand. In other words, it brutally exposed the process of commodification of migrant labour, while also posing important questions on the directions of future State policy.

While specific ad-hoc interventions in terms of economic and social inclusion of migrant labour are certainly welcome, what drives the terms and conditions of employment of migrant workers is primarily linked to the extent and type of regulation in the labour market. Without new State policies geared to constrain employers' opportunistic behaviours in recruiting and employing (migrant) workers under substandard conditions, as well as implementing and monitoring decent labour standards, segmentation drives and exploitative practices will be maintained and perpetuated. Changing this is not only important from the perspective of migrant workers' well-being, as employers' opportunistic behaviours are detrimental to the State and the general public as well: by evading costs in terms of workers' protections by offering precarious and flexible contracts, costs are transferred on the State ([Rubery et al., 2016](#)). This is valid in general, but the pandemic makes this more evident and extends social risks to the public health domain: costs evasion in terms of protective equipment and measures to prevent infections on the working place harms individual's health and safety (e.g. (migrant) workers and patients within elderly care environments for instance) and the health and safety of the general public, again putting a burden on State resources.

All in all, what is desirable from a migrant' well-being and State resource perspective, and to ensure equality and fairness across countries in labour markets, is that the State takes its role as protector more seriously. Examples of stricter regulations to secure better employment contracts, and therewith working conditions for migrant workers in lower segment jobs, are steps in the right direction. Yet, the possibilities and extent of more inclusionary policies depends on the power dynamics between institutional actors and the level of support for State interventions provided by the existing institutional set-up of the countries concerned. While the pandemic laid bare fundamental short-comings in the protection of migrant workers, it is upon States and society to stretch the COVID-19 momentum beyond this period to systematically alter the treatment and conditions of migrant workers who are vital in keeping economies and societies afloat, across the globe, in and beyond pandemic emergency times.

Paper summaries

The papers included in this Special Issue on State policies and regulations regarding migrant work during, and beyond, the COVID-19 pandemic cover different groups of migrant workers, with different occupational and residency statuses, in a variety of countries.

Vergnano's contribution discusses the impact of two measures adopted by the Italian State during the pandemic related to migrant workers: the regularization of undocumented workers in the domestic and agro-industrial sector and the health-pass requirement to access workplaces. Instead of promoting migrants' social, economic and health rights, Vergnano shows that the measures led to further exploitation and increased workers dependence on employers. While the measures were motivated by public health concerns, the practical implications were detrimental to migrants. Far less migrants than initially envisioned were able to regularize their status because of strict admission criteria and the requirement that only employers could start the application, not the migrant or an NGO. The health-pass requirement was especially detrimental for unvaccinated workers, who faced unemployment and loss of income because of it. Vergnano shows how State policies, in practice, can have a limited if not detrimental impact on the conditions of structurally exploited migrant workers.

Using Austrian posting [2] notification data, Danaj *et al.*'s contribution highlights how the mobility of posted workers in the Austrian construction sector, considered a non-essential – yet economically important – sector, was hardly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. National and industry-specific measures taken by the Austrian State and social partners regarding health and safety conditions in construction played an important role in the continued mobility of posted workers and workplace health and safety protection. Yet, Danaj *et al.* also show that despite continued mobility measures, posted workers remained excluded, precisely because of their employment status, from State support policies adopted to maintain employment and shield workers from COVID-19 related job and income loss. In other words, posted worker vulnerabilities, inherent to the way posting is regulated and used in practice, remained unaddressed, leaving workers in precarious conditions, depending on their individual employment, social and migration status in Austria.

The contribution by Ndomo, Bontenbal and Lillie stipulates that Finland's student migration policies allocate African migrant workers to the lower labour market segments, regardless of their education, qualifications or work experience. The Finnish student migrant policy, with an annual 6,720-euro savings requirement for student residence permit renewal, forces many non-EU students to take up low-waged jobs, creating a vulnerable and cheap labour pool for Finnish employers. What Ndomo *et al.* show, based on biographical interviews with highly-educated Africans, is that the COVID-19 pandemic created additional demand for (temporary) essential occupations within the lower labour market segments, in the form of COVID-care occupations for instance, which African workers used to shield themselves from COVID-related job and income loss. This leads, as Ndomo *et al.* illustrate, to a continuation of segmentation in the Finnish labour market, with little employment perspectives for highly educated African workers beyond these low-waged secondary jobs, also past the pandemic period.

Berntsen, Böcker, De Lange, Mantu and Skowronek emphasize how State responses are multi-layered and path dependent by discussing Dutch state initiatives taken during the COVID-19 pandemic to improve the protection of EU migrant workers. They argue that the effects of the State responses should be considered in light of the gradual institutional change through which existing institutions already before the pandemic lost their effectiveness as protectors of EU migrant workers. The State initiatives taken since the pandemic counter some of this gradual institutional change, by boosting social dialogue mechanisms and enhancing State enforcement capacity and new housing legislation. However, with a Dutch state that remains reluctant to fundamentally alter the way migrant work is organized through tighter public legislation, the impact on the conditions of work experienced by the migrants involved remains limited.

Gheorghiev's contribution discusses the Czech State response in the area of labour migration policies and health insurance during the pandemic. The Czech labour market is highly reliant on (non)EU migrant labour, facing sincere labour shortages in low-waged sector jobs. As Gheorghiev points out, the Czech employers need for cheap migrant labour during the pandemic was framed as a matter of national economic interest and therefore State

priority, explaining the Czech State's predominant concern to guarantee a continued incoming flow of (TCN) migrant labour, with little regard for the conditions of work. Within the existing institutional set-up, an initiative to improve healthcare coverage for migrant workers, failed miserably, leaving this segment of the Czech labour force poorly protected.

The contribution of Milly to this special issue centres on the Japanese State's multi-level response towards different groups of migrant workers in Japan whose terms of entry and stay differ: international students, technical interns and co-ethnics with long-term residence visas. While the Japanese government granted emergency visa extensions, Milly points out that access to employment and opportunities to change jobs were restricted for certain groups, and administrative hurdles prevented access to State emergency support benefits for others. In front of such lack of institutional support, local communities initiated to provide for migrants' urgent needs, especially in case of migrants with local community ties. Milly thus shows how national and local policy and support priorities are shaped by considerations of migrants' potential future contribution to the national economy and by the existence of local and co-ethnic ties.

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Notes

1. In the following, we use the term migrant workers to refer to workers who were born in another country than the country where they work. We thus refer only to migrants with a first-generation migration background.
2. Posting refers to a specific type of mobile cross-border work in the EU, where workers are sent from one country to an EU Member State to provide a service for a temporary period of time (Posting of Workers Directive 96/71/EC).

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