

Policy Brief

EU Talent Partnerships

Fit for purpose?

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#TalentPartnerships
#MigrationEU
#NewPact

On 11 June, the Commission presented its proposal for so-called “Talent Partnerships” as a framework for member states to engage strategically with selected third countries on legal migration. Based on several pilot projects, the Talent Partnerships should allow member states to address their skills needs whilst improving cooperation in areas such as readmission or migration management. This Policy Brief takes a closer look behind the illusive terminology and asks: what exactly are Talent Partnerships? After discussing their major challenges and opportunities, the Policy Brief outlines three principles that should guide the Partnerships’ implementation: clear and realistic objectives, a focus on countries beyond the EU’s immediate neighbourhood, and avoiding negative conditionality.

1 Introduction

Two themes underpin the EU’s approach to legal migration. First, there is the argument that a demographically declining Europe needs foreign workers to meet labour market demands. Second, policy makers frequently stress that offering legal pathways to third countries could help reduce irregular arrivals and might help facilitate the readmission of failed asylum seekers.

Both themes are also at the core of the Commission’s latest attempt to reshape the EU’s policy on legal migration and its relationship with partner countries. On 11 June, the Commission presented its plans for establishing so-called “Talent Partnerships” with selected third countries to representatives of the member states and the European Parliament. The idea of Talent Partnerships had already been floated in the [New Pact on Asylum and Migration](#), albeit without much detail about their scope or setup. Essentially, they should [address](#) labour and skills needs in the member states and deepen cooperation with third countries on migration management. In that vein, Vice-President Schinas [referred](#) to the Talent Partnerships as playing “an important role in reducing the skills gap”, whilst Commissioner Johansson stressed that “replacing irregular migration with legal migration should be our strategic objective”.

The Commission’s unveiling of the Talent Partnerships proposal comes at a crucial moment. The coronavirus pandemic has highlighted the important role of migrant workers in sectors such as healthcare and tourism. As EU countries gradually recover from the economic crisis, [demand](#) for foreign labour is likely to increase in other sectors as well. Adjusting labour mobility schemes to meet these needs will hence be a major challenge in the near future. Moreover,

the EU has in recent years increasingly come to rely on third countries to act as gatekeepers, helping to reduce the number of new arrivals. Yet, the latest events in Ceuta or at the land border between Turkey and Greece have demonstrated just how thin this veneer of stability really is. The EU is thus in a position of having to substantiate its approach to third countries, delivering on its [promise](#) of “acting together” through “balanced and tailor-made partnerships”.

Following the official launch, member states are now invited to put forward proposals for Talent Partnerships with selected third countries. To get a better understanding of how these might look like in practice, this Policy Brief first seeks to provide an overview of the projects on which the Commission proposal is built by asking: what exactly are Talent Partnerships? It then explores the main challenges and opportunities of the Talent Partnership concept before concluding with three principles on which these should be based: clear and realistic expectations (i), a focus on countries beyond the EU’s immediate neighbourhood (ii) and the avoidance of negative conditionality (iii).

2 What are Talent Partnerships?

Over and above references to existing tools, such as readmission agreements, visa facilitation commitments or status agreements, the New Pact introduced two new legal migration instruments: the EU Talent Pool and Talent Partnerships. Despite their semantic similarity, the two proposals are conceived of as entirely separate instruments. Whereas the Talent Pool is supposed to become an online platform for skills-matching, Talent Partnerships were [described](#) by the Commission as “an EU policy and funding framework” that adds an additional instrument to the EU’s toolbox for engaging strategically with partner countries. Its basic idea is twofold: provide a scheme for member states to address their skills needs whilst improving cooperation with relevant third countries.

To that end, the Talent Partnerships will be modelled on existing pilot projects under the Mobility Partnership facility (MPF) and the European Trust Fund’s [THAMM](#) programme. These have primarily focussed on assessing potential migrants’ skills and qualifications, providing vocational training, and offering legal pathways for selected candidates via bilateral agreements. A [pilot project](#) between Belgium and Morocco, for example, provided technical training to 120 Moroccans and intended to offer 30 candidates a work contract in Belgium’s ICT sector, which thus far did not materialise due to Covid-19. Through the Talent Partnerships, the Commission now intends to substantially scale up existing projects, both in terms of the number of legal pathways offered and the available funding. The Talent Partnerships will provide [mobility options](#) for third country nationals to study, work or undertake vocational training in the EU. Their focus on attracting “talent” further underlines the Commission’s attempt to catch up in the international race for skilled workers and signals to member states the importance of integrating legal migration policies within their strategy for tackling domestic labour market shortages.

Whereas MPF pilot projects were primarily funded by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF), the Talent Partnerships’ ambitious scope means that they will receive [funding](#) mostly under the much larger Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI). By replacing previous ad hoc schemes with longer-term funding, the Talent Partnerships are intended to help deepen cooperation with third countries viewed as strategically important, primarily in North Africa and the Western Balkans.

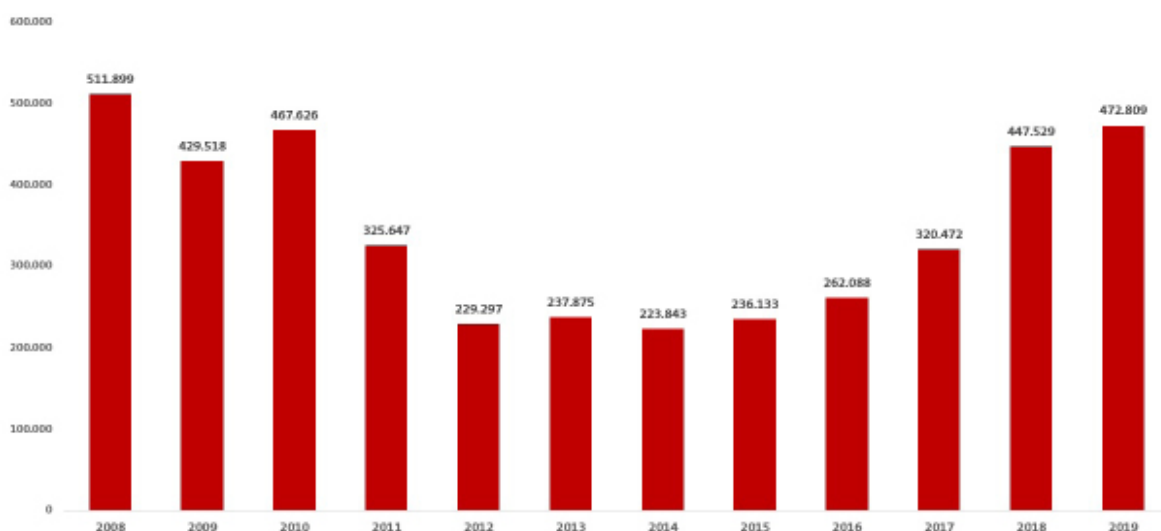
As a “comprehensive framework”, the Talent Partnerships also mirror the idea behind the Global Skills Partnership model (GSP), which is mentioned as an explicit policy recommendation in the Global Compact for Migration and has informed some of the MPF pilot projects. Global Skills Partnerships were developed in response to the realisation that existing legal migration agreements can be exploitative for countries of origin, often causing brain drain without any trade-off for the domestic labour market. As part of a [Global Skills Partnership](#), a traditional sending country therefore agrees “to train people in skills specifically and immediately needed in both the country of origin and destination”. Once training is completed, some candidates then have the chance to migrate to the destination country, whilst others remain in the “home track” to find employment in their country of origin.

Like the Global Skills Partnership, the Commission’s proposal for a Talent Partnership is supposed

to embrace multiple actors in both the participating EU member state and the sending country, including responsible ministries, employment agencies and the private sector. While the detailed setup can vary between projects, the Commission will generally provide funding and facilitate networking between the partners involved. However, the main objectives of a Global Skills Partnership and the Commission’s Talent Partnerships differ. The former model has a strong focus on enhancing economic development in the sending country. Talent Partnerships “will also ensure capacity building assistance to partner countries” but their primarily [objective](#) is to “engage with non-EU country partners strategically on migration management” while addressing skills shortages in the member states.

By embedding the Talent Partnerships within the EU’s wider set of external migration instruments, the proposal thus continues to [frame](#) the *external* dimension of EU migration policy primarily as a means to achieve *internal* policy objectives. This resembles previous approaches to establishing “comprehensive” agreements with third countries under the Global Approach to Migration and Mobility (GAMM) and the EU Agenda on Migration. Even so, previous initiatives have done little to increase the availability of legal pathways for non-EU nationals. Indeed, the number of long-term residence permits issued for employment purposes to third country nationals is lower now than it was ten years ago, as Chart 1 shows.

Chart 1: Residence permits issued to non-EU nationals for employment purposes



Note: Residence permits for more than 12 months issued by all EU member states (including the UK); Data for 2020 not available. *Source: Eurostat*

3 Challenges and opportunities: what to learn from existing practice?

Whether the Talent Partnerships can live up to the Commission’s expectations and increase the number of available pathways essentially depends on the member states’ willingness to invest in larger, longer-term projects on legal migration. An examination of existing pilot projects under the MPF and the Global Skills Partnership model may help to set the right level of ambition. Although these pilots are rather small in scale, they do provide a useful overview of the main challenges and opportunities that member states are likely to encounter when putting the Talent Partnerships to work. To date, three pilot projects have been concluded under the MPF. These were led by Belgium, France and Spain in cooperation with Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt, while a project between Lithuania and Nigeria expires by the end of 2021. Four new projects led by Italy, Belgium, Slovakia and Spain are currently in the planning stage. Independent of the MPF, Germany applied the Global Skills Partnership approach in cooperation with Kosovo.

3.1 Preparation and coordination

A major challenge in the preparation and coordination of pilot projects has been the **complexity of their setup**. The idea of combining skills-matching, vocational training and the offer of legal pathways requires a multitude of actors at local, regional and national level to be involved in the project. Preparation therefore demands considerable time and resources that must be invested in identifying relevant stakeholders, mapping competences and building trust among partners. Crucially, this includes involving the private sector right from the start to secure employers' buy-in and longer-term commitment. Experience from the pilot projects has also highlighted the lack of comprehensive data on the sectors hit by shortages, as well as on the specific type of skills in need. In light of these drawbacks, the pilot projects' initial timeframe of 12 to 18 months has proven to be too tight to deliver the anticipated objectives.

Incorporating multiple actors also means dealing with **multiple objectives**. These can range from prioritising skills-matching to encouraging economic development in the partner country. They might also include facilitating legal pathways as leverage to improve cooperation in other areas, such as readmission or border management. Interests can then easily diverge and sometimes also be at odds. Mediating them is therefore not only a challenge when it comes to project setup and coordination, but also in assessment. Deciding which parameters will determine the success or failure of a pilot project is essential for longer-term planning and thus requires a strong role for monitoring and evaluation. Moreover, a power dynamic is at play between different actors. For example, exclusive funding from the European side may risk prioritising receiving countries' interests and needs over those of the sending country, and this may eventually undermine a potentially positive development impact.

Despite many hurdles, the multitude of actors involved also bring with them the opportunity to establish broad support for the project. This is relevant especially for countries that have not yet incorporated legal migration within their portfolio of policies to address skills shortages, or that are wary of public opinion. Support across different ministries and from the private sector can help shape a more positive image of legal migration. Similarly, migration partnerships can help set up international networks. A pilot project between Lithuania and Nigeria, for example, has helped the involved employers to establish international contacts. Including the private sector in mapping skills-needs and devising training curriculum can further aid employers to hire workers with exactly the kind of qualifications needed.

3.2 Impact

The small scale on which most MPF and GSP pilot projects have been operating makes it difficult to assess their impact. This is also one of the major challenges to overcome. For the Talent Partnerships to become a credible migration policy tool, future projects will have to create substantially more legal pathways. Of the four MPF [pilot projects](#), only France's HOMERe project with Tunisia, Morocco and Egypt aimed at a considerable number of mobilities (250). Spain's cooperation with Morocco intended offering 100 students the possibility to study in Spain. Yet, some of the projects failed to deliver even on modest objectives. For example, Belgium's project with Morocco hoped to create pathways for 30 people, but so far struggled to do so. Thus far, Lithuania equally allowed just 26 people from Nigeria the possibility to apply for a work visa, although the project was designed for 50 people.¹ While this was in part due to travel restrictions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, long waiting times for visa approvals and scepticism from employers equally undermined the projects' anticipated scope.

Whereas the idea of Global Skills Partnerships is to create mobility options for lower- and middle-skilled workers as well, most MPF pilot projects focussed on high-skilled migrants. The projects' target groups either included IT workers, engineers or master's students. Currently, labour migration policies targeting low-skilled workers [remain limited](#) across the EU although many migrant workers are employed in low-skilled professions. It will thus be a challenge for the Talent Partnerships to match demand in sectors requiring lower-skilled workers if they are to complement and diversify member states' existing portfolios of legal pathways. In a similar vein, pilot projects often remain limited to offering short-term visas. These can be useful for promoting circular migration. Yet, they reflect member states' hesitancy in offering longer-term visas and might signal a lack of political will to perceive legal migration – and the integration of foreign workers – as a core element of their economies.

¹ Numbers from stakeholder interviews.

Furthermore, existing projects are mostly limited to a few “familiar faces”. This is true on the European side: Most projects under the MPF or the Global Skills Partnership model are conducted by countries that are already relevant players on legal migration such as France, Germany, the Benelux countries, Ireland or Spain. It is even truer when it comes to the partnering third countries. Existing projects predominantly focus on North Africa where they are almost inevitably linked to cooperation on border management and readmission. This “strategic focus” is mirrored in the New Pact, which explicitly mentions North Africa and the Western Balkans as priority areas for the new Talent Partnerships.

When done right though, existing projects demonstrate that the proposed Talent Partnerships can have a positive impact on both receiving and sending countries. In particular the Global Skills Partnership’s approach can help [address legitimate concerns](#) on both sides. First, it can help European countries in their efforts to manage migratory flows more effectively. To date, there are no reliable studies proving that offering legal pathways has reduced irregular arrivals in the past. Yet, increasing the number of legal pathways does help receiving states make migration more predictable.

Second, the pilot projects have shown that cooperation in the form of a Talent Partnership helps address skills shortages in EU member states. Whereas member states remain interested in attracting high-skilled workers, Germany’s project on training and admitting construction workers from Kosovo demonstrates the relevance of hiring in sectors demanding medium-skilled workers. The over-representation of migrants from third countries as so-called “essential workers”, many of them in low- and mid-skilled professions, during the Covid-19 pandemic has underlined this.

Third, such partnerships can help make a positive development impact in the partnering third country. Whilst traditional labour mobility schemes often lead to a “brain drain” in sending countries, this is not necessarily the case under the Global Skills Partnerships which include vocational training for workers who remain in their country of origin. Even in cases where pathways are linked to short-term visas, circular migration can foster the transfer of skills, technology and remittances.

Table 1: Overview of challenges and opportunities based on existing pilot projects

| | Challenges | Opportunities |
|----------------------------|---|--|
| Preparation & coordination | <p>Considerable time and resources must be invested in identifying relevant actors, building trust among them and aligning stakeholders’ objectives</p> <p>There is lack of data on the sectors that experience shortage occupations and the type of skills in demand</p> <p>Short duration of projects can render deliverables unrealistic</p> | <p>Broad coalition of political, institutional and private actors makes support more likely</p> <p>Training workers with the precise skills & qualifications needed by employers</p> <p>Internationalisation and networking opportunity for private sector</p> |
| Impact | <p>Small scale pilot projects are unlikely to make an impact on the EU’s overall migration policy</p> <p>Partnerships exclusively with “familiar faces” narrows strategic focus</p> <p>Pilots remain too focussed on high-skilled workers</p> | <p>Helps making migratory flows more predictable and manageable</p> <p>Address skills-shortages and labour market needs in EU member states and partner countries</p> <p>Contributes to economic development of sending country by training workers for domestic labour market</p> |

4 Moving forward: Implementing the Talent Partnerships

Transitioning from the pilot phase to the implementation of the Talent Partnerships requires support from the authorities in the member states, private actors and from third countries. Adhering to three principles might help garner that support and move the Talent Partnerships forward: set clear and realistic objectives (i), focus on countries beyond the EU's immediate neighbourhood (ii) and avoid the use of negative conditionality (iii).

⇒ Set clear and realistic objectives

Disentangling the Talent Partnerships' complex set-up requires clarity and realism. Based on the Commission's presentation, Talent Partnerships should provide skills-matching, enhance development cooperation and incentives readmissions in equal measure. These ambitions might be weighed and pursued to different extents by the many actors involved in the projects. To avoid frustration and align expectations Talent partnership projects should clearly define and communicate their objectives. This also implies a stronger role for monitoring and evaluation. Agreement on common objectives and determining the parameters for success should be in place before launching new projects. A robust evaluation mechanism is essential for the Commission's plan to significantly scale up the financial and operational scope of projects. Evaluation should thereby not only focus on the number of trained candidates and the pathways provided, but also include longer-term monitoring of the real development impact on sending countries.

Determining objectives also requires remaining realistic about their potential impact. Despite the Commission's ambition of increasing the number of available pathways, the Talent Partnerships cannot and should not be seen as an instrument to reduce irregular arrivals. New projects should therefore not live or die depending on their perceived ability to reduce irregular migration.

Being realistic also implies allowing for longer time-frames to achieve a project's objectives. For example, acquiring a formal qualification to work in a specific sector might take longer in one country than in another. Thus, the content and duration of training courses must be adapted to suit sending and receiving countries. This requires new projects to run for two to four years, rather than 12 to 18 months as was initially the case. A lengthier duration would also match the complex initiation of projects and provide the flexibility to compensate for potential setbacks, such as Covid-19-related travel restrictions.

⇒ Widen focus on countries that will be of strategic importance

According to the Commission, a major element of the Talent Partnerships will be their "strategic" approach. Essentially, this implies the Partnerships' use as a complementary instrument in the EU's external migration toolbox for engaging with relevant partner countries on readmission or border management. When tailored along the lines of the Global Skills Partnership model, the Talent Partnerships might indeed provide a new incentive for third countries through their twin focus on training workers for the labour market in both receiving and sending country.

Yet, for the Talent Partnerships to be truly strategic, they should not exclusively focus on countries in the EU's vicinity that require immediate attention. Instead, they should include cooperation with countries that will be of strategic relevance to the EU in the medium term. Recent studies have shown that emigration rises as GDP per capita increases. This [trend gradually slows](#) down as GDP per capita reaches roughly \$5,000 and goes into reverse at \$10,000. Morocco (\$3,200), Algeria (\$3,900), Tunisia (\$3,300) and Egypt (\$3,800) are all on the cusp of switching from being sending countries to receiving ones in the near future. Strategic partnerships would thus also have to include countries from sub-Saharan Africa, for example, where GDP per capita is often significantly lower, suggesting that emigration will increase as economic development improves. Partnering with these countries on legal migration might prove more challenging given the absence of previous cooperation. However, it would also add a more anticipatory element to the EU's external migration strategy.

⇒ **Beware of negative conditionality**

Funding for the Talent Partnerships will be channelled through the €79bn budget of the new NDICI instrument, of which 10% is earmarked for migration and forced displacement. Technically, this renders the Talent Partnership part of EU policy development cooperation – an area that has in the past been characterised by greater use of conditionality. Discussions about the use of conditionality have shifted towards a recent focus on more restrictive measures, moving from “more for more” to a “less for less” approach. Such negative sanctions have notably been applied to increase the number of readmissions to third countries. For example, by [delaying the disbursement](#) of funds under the EUTF, the Commission succeeded in signing a non-binding readmission agreement with Ethiopia in 2018. However, the [effectiveness](#) of “less for less” conditionality to bring about longer-term cooperation on readmission or border management has frequently been [challenged](#).

Implementing the Talent Partnership should, then, not be subject to a “less for less” approach. Decisions on whether to end or continue funding individual projects should not be made conditional upon a partner country’s cooperation in other policy areas. First, negative conditionality undermines the EU’s (rhetorical) [ambition](#) of establishing “a true partnership of equals” with African countries. A lack of African ownership on funding and objectives under the EUTF has already led to much [frustration](#) among the continent’s partner countries. Applying a “less for less” logic in the Talent Partnerships might hasten irritation and eventually weaken the EU’s position as a relevant actor in the region vis a vis emerging players such as China, Russia or the Gulf countries. Second, the complexity of initiating and implementing the Talent Partnerships requires long-term planning. Yet, this contradicts the idea of making allocation of NDICI funds dependent on [annual assessments](#) of a partner country’s cooperation on readmission or border management.

Third, applying negative conditionality to NDICI funding for the Talent Partnerships contradicts the fact that mobility is a driver and consequence of economic development. A look at the impact of [remittances](#) on some of the envisioned partner countries under the Talent Partnerships confirms this. In Morocco remittances make up 5.8% of GDP, in Albania it is 9.3% and in Tunisia and Nigeria it’s 5.3% and 5.7% respectively. Introducing a “less for less” logic to negotiations with third countries on the Talent Partnerships hence risks undermining the effectiveness and purpose of development assistance.

5 Conclusion

In summary, the Talent Partnerships proposal has the potential to add a new element to the EU’s external migration policy. Although the Commission has framed the Talent Partnerships as an instrument serving both themes shaping the EU’s approach to legal migration – meeting skills demand and migration management – implementation is likely to be more successful if the first outweighs the second.

Training potential migrants with the specific skills needed in the member states could help respond to current and future labour market pressures. However, it remains to be seen how many member states will express interest in participating in the Talent Partnerships and whether new projects will lead to an immediate increase of new pathways. The Talent Partnerships should therefore be understood as long-term investment in developing a network of private and public actors which can help EU countries attract workers across all skill levels. Equally important, the Talent Partnerships should be designed to benefit the economic development of partner countries. Modelling new projects on the Global Skills Partnership approach could help meet that end. Avoiding the use of negative conditionality will also be essential in ensuring that Talent Partnerships pave the way for more equal and balanced cooperation with third countries.

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