

SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY, SOCIAL POLICY AND THE STAKE OF MIGRANTS' AND REFUGEES' SOCIAL INCLUSION

DOI: 10.26341/issn.2241-4002-2024-5a-2-T02029

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Abstract

Social sustainability constitutes one of the main theoretical pillars of sustainable development, although it is open to variations in its content and meaning, as there is no universally accepted definition so far. In our analysis, this concept refers to the need for the creation of a society that contains all the conditions for sustainable development in terms of equal opportunities for employment and social well-being. Therefore, social policy that promotes activation and inclusion could become a key determinant of social sustainability. Currently, significant problems and dysfunctions exist as long as several European labour markets (especially of the South) are fragmented with a strong insiders-outsiders divergence, job-polarization, high labour market slack, while in-work poverty rates are particularly high especially in precarious forms of employment and subsequently a new precarity seems to emerge, especially among the youth. Further, severe and multi-parametric socio-economic inequalities affect education, where the inter-generational transition of educational achievement (or even poverty) is evident all across Europe and affects young people's life chances. All the above-mentioned seem to have a clear impact on migrants' and refugees' social inclusion. A major trend that is observed is that refugees, as well as immigrant, tend to be securitized. Preliminary analysis shows that this practice has a direct impact on the precarity of refugees, contradicting an inclusive approach to migration.

In Europe as well as globally, addressing these issues is of major importance in order to ensure social sustainability. Especially after the pandemic, it turns out that the welfare state should operate on the basis of identified needs, effectiveness, efficiency and quality of services provided, thus adapting to new changes and challenges, in order to promote social sustainability. The above-mentioned challenges are interrelated with migration policy, especially when it comes to migrants' and refugees' social inclusion and subsequently tackling with their existing precarity. The purpose- scope of this contribution is to analyze the state of play regarding social sustainability and the relevant key challenges for the public policy complex, emphasizing migration policy. More specifically, this paper aims at providing the reader with a holistic analysis of the state of play of social sustainability in Europe and aims to identify specific policy responses that could offer viable solutions to old and emerging challenges in terms of social inclusion, within the framework of evidence-based policy making. Further it emphasizes on the issue of migrants' and refugees' social inclusion/ precarity and analyses the challengers regarding migration policy, within the framework of a social sustainability-driven approach. The methods used for the above-mentioned analysis are literature review and secondary quantitative analysis.

Key Words: *Sustainable Development, Social Sustainability, Welfare State, Employability, Education, Migrants' and Refugees' precarity and social inclusion*

Introduction

Social sustainability constitutes one of the main theoretical pillars of sustainable development. This concept is open to variations in its content and meaning, as there is no universally accepted definition so far. Despite this, though, the debate on sustainable development and its content have led to the creation of several different definitions. What they had in common was the effort to deepen both the environmental issues as well as the socio-economic ones (Boström, 2012).

The Rio Conference in 1992 brought together all these issues to the public debate and several states signed Agenda 21 and the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, committing themselves to implementing a sustainable development policy that respects the principles mentioned above (United Nations, 1992).

The UN conference in Johannesburg in 2002 and, more importantly, the 2012 conference on sustainable development in Brazil, were characterized by the attempt to link the three pillars of sustainable development (environmental, social, economic) and consequently to consolidate the coexistence of economic development, environmental protection and the safeguarding of social cohesion (United Nations, 2012).

The issues tackled in Johannesburg included (United Nations, 2002):

- The importance of civil society and the private sector in promoting inclusiveness and cooperation between different actors (with the ultimate aim of strengthening social entrepreneurship in order to promote sustainable development),
- The link between green growth and the battle against unemployment and poverty
- Institutional reorganization at international, national and regional level in order to achieve sustainable development.

Currently, significant problems and dysfunctions exist as long as several European labour markets (especially of the South) are fragmented with a strong 'insiders-outsiders' divergence, job-polarization, high labour market slack, while in-work poverty rates are particularly high especially in precarious forms of employment and subsequently a new

precarity seems to emerge, especially among the youth. Further, severe and multi-parametric socio-economic inequalities affect education, where the inter-generational transition of educational achievement (or even poverty) is evident all across Europe and affects young people's life chances (Castro, 2004).

All the above-mentioned seem to have a clear impact on migrants' and refugees' social inclusion. A major trend that is observed in this context is that refugees, as well as migrants, tend to be securitized. Preliminary analysis shows that this practice has a direct impact on the precarity of refugees, contradicting an inclusive approach to migration (Papadakis & Dimari, 2023).

In Europe as well as globally, addressing these issues is of major importance in order to ensure social sustainability. Especially after the pandemic, it turns out that the welfare state should operate on the basis of identified needs, effectiveness, efficiency and quality of services provided, thus adapting to new changes and challenges, in order to promote social sustainability. The above-mentioned challenges are interrelated with migration policy, especially when it comes to migrants and refugees' social inclusion and subsequently with their existing precarity.

In this sense, the purpose of this paper is to unpack the state of play regarding social sustainability and the respective key challenges for the public policy complex, zooming on migration policy. More specifically, this paper aims at providing a holistic analysis of the state of play of social sustainability in Europe as well as at identifying specific policy responses that could offer viable solutions to old and emerging challenges in terms of social inclusion, within the framework of evidence-based policy making. In addition, this paper centers around the migrants and refugees' social inclusion/ precarity and examines the challenges posed when making migration policy, within the framework of a social sustainability-driven approach. The methods used for the above-mentioned analysis are literature review and secondary quantitative analysis.

Methodology

For the purposes of this paper the methods used were literature review and a secondary quantitative analysis. The literature review was chosen because as Snyder (2019) argues "*an effective and well-conducted review as a research method creates a firm foundation for advancing knowledge*". As such, a great number of policy reports and documents in conjunction with accredited literature on sustainable development, welfare states, precarity and the refugee crisis were used for the literature review to depict the current state of play of the issue examined and to detect gaps so as to proceed to policy proposals.

As far as the secondary quantitative analysis is concerned, this method regards the assessment of quantitative data that have been already collected in several instances of research conduction so that they can be used from scratch to answer totally new and different research questions (Johnston, 2014). What was important to zoom into, according to our academic view, was the numerous official sources of the European Commission, the United Nations and institutions such as Eurostat and the World Economic Forum.

Social sustainability dimensions: Employment, education and the welfare state

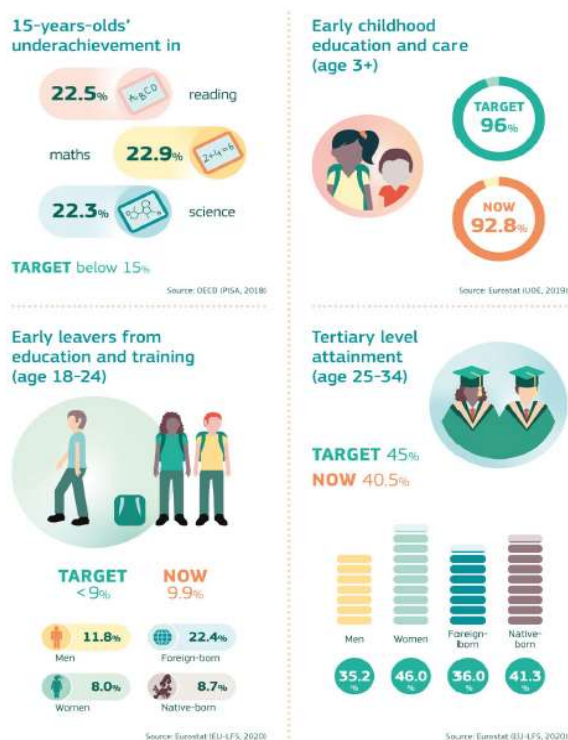
The connection between the three pillars of sustainability (environmental, social, economic), continues to be unclear in several cases. Indeed, it seems that different priorities are given to each of these dimensions and even more, they are not integrated as a whole, giving the concept of sustainability an unclear and often "open" content, thus, highlighting the need for further analysis that would lead to the articulation of a more precise and comprehensive definition (Castro, 2004).

In the Brundtland report there was a connection between sustainability and needs, highlighting a kind of development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the need of future generations, thus indicating the interconnection between nature and society. This approach provided a desired human-centered dimension to sustainability highlighting, as such, intergenerational solidarity (Baker et al, 2005). But how can social sustainability be actually achieved?

Employment is one of the key sustainable development factors whereas, at the same time, it constitutes the fundamental precondition for the achievement of social sustainability. The rationale behind this argument is twofold: on the one hand, employment plays a key role in making ends meet and on the other, it improves living conditions by bringing together social and environmental factors in a successful way. Indeed, a key component in achieving social sustainability is the creation of conditions and opportunities for the satisfaction of individual needs. As such, employment, which is the dominant factor for achieving individual autonomy, through the existence of appropriate norms, institutions and normative-protective frameworks, could achieve individual well-being if promoted in a socially just context within the framework of an active welfare State (see Papadakis & Tzagkarakis, 2024).

Other than employment, another crucial component for the achievement of social sustainability is education. Indeed, it is well established that the role of education is of vital importance for social inclusion and subsequently for social sustainability. However, in the EU, severe and multi-parametric socio-economic inequalities affect education, where the inter-generational transition of educational achievement (or even poverty) which affects young people's life chances, is evident all across Europe. Based on data published in the Education and Training Monitor 2021 (see European Commission, 2021; and Picture 1), at the end of the EU2020 strategy and its Educational branch, we can be optimistic in terms of the achievement of objectives set for tertiary education attainment, early childhood education, early leavers from education and training as well employment rate of recent graduates.

Picture 1: EU targets in education and training by 2020



Source: Eurostat (EU-LFS, 2020).

At the same time, though, we cannot be equally optimistic concerning the achievement of goals related to the reduction of low achievers in key competences (reading, maths, science), and participation in LLL till 2020. There is a clear progress within the recent 5 years, yet several key challenges still remain.

The role of education is as such vital for the reversal of socio-economic inequalities in the EU. At least this is what the official data on the matter argue. More specifically, the EU average of early leavers from education and training is very close to achieve the 9% (specifically less than 9%) EU benchmark by 2030 (European Commission, 2021: 84). However, in 2021, the EU average of native-born early leavers was much lower (8.8%) than the respective EU average of foreign-born early leavers (22.4%), whereas the EU average of those born outside the EU was 23.3% (see in detail Eurostat, EU Labour Force Survey, 2020. Online data code: [edat_lfse_02] and [edat_lfse_30] as cited in European Commission, 2021: 89).

Progress is continuing in the headline target for tertiary educational attainment, since the EU has met its target of raising the rate of tertiary educational attainment to at least 40% of the population (30-34 years). Within this context, Member States have agreed on an EU benchmark, that is that the share of 25-34 years with tertiary educational attainment should be at least 45% by 2030 (European Commission, 2021: 95). However, it should be mentioned that, *“there are clear discrepancies between urban and rural areas; the average rate in cities (50.9%) being substantially higher than it is in rural areas (28.9%).”* (European Commission, 2021: 95).

In spite of the prioritization of adults’ participation in LLL, even since the Lisbon Strategy period, in terms of the target related to adults’ participation in learning (aged 25-64), the progress that has been made from the Member States is very slow. In 2019, the EU average was 10.8%, decreasing by 1.6pps (9.2%) in 2020, 5.8 pps below the EU2020 benchmark of 15% (European Commission, 2021: 110). Additionally, a major deficit in the LLL, namely the under-representation of socially vulnerable groups and low skilled, is still visible and remains a challenge. As European Commission pointed out in 2018, low-skilled adults, -who need more than anyone else the access to learning,- participated the least in learning, while the age group of adults aged 25-34 are almost three times more likely to participate in learning than adults aged 55-64 (see in detail European Commission, 2019: 71-73, Papadakis 2022; Papadakis & Drakaki 2023).

To conclude, it becomes evident that that there is a strong association between educational attainment and social outcomes (Papadakis & Drakaki 2023: 7), while the inter-generational transition of educational poverty still affects various aspects of both education and social inclusion (Papadakis, 2022: 217-219). *“People with only basic education are almost three times more likely to live in poverty or social exclusion than those with tertiary education”* (European Commission, 2017: 9), while major inequalities *“do not only raise concerns in terms of fairness, as they usually reflect a high risk of poverty and social exclusion, but also in economic terms, as they lead to an under-utilisation of human capital. Inter-generational transmission of poverty compounds these negative impacts”* (European Commission, 2017: 22).

The abovementioned set a challenge that cannot be confronted by just a new Education, Training and LLL strategy (without underestimating its importance and necessity). There are required major transformations in the public policy complex and a new equilibrium between the macroeconomic agenda and the Welfare policies (in fond of the second) and subsequently a *“brave”* turn towards a new *“re-distributive pragmatism”*. (Papadakis & Drakaki 2023: 7).

In respect of all the above, what is the role of the welfare state for social sustainability? Social sustainability is not only an analytical but also a normative concept, as it is based on rights derived from nationally and internationally recognized treaties as well as social norms

(Baker et al, 2005). Consequently, social sustainability refers and relates to the quality of societies. It is therefore clear that the achievement of these principles requires the existence of an institutional framework, such as the welfare state, which ensures the conditions for socially just development and promotes incentives through public policies that aim to activate citizens, raise awareness and build a civil society that will contribute effectively and creatively to the effort of achieving social well-being (see Papadakis & Tzagkarakis, 2024).

In this way, the human capital is expected to provide the necessary guarantees regarding state protection and expansion. Crucially as well, the human capital is not going to depend on the state in a one-dimensional way, as it is expected to have the incentives and scope for action and development to lead to social capital expansion. As long as the institutional safeguards and incentives are provided by the state, the awareness concerning the need for action is expected to have a logical consequence, with forms such as social entrepreneurship flourishing and providing socially positive services (see Papadakis & Tzagkarakis, 2024).

In light of the above discussion, it is deemed important to say a few words on the factors that contribute to social sustainability. A first category includes all those factors that are related to the satisfaction of basic needs and the improvement of the quality of one's life. Therefore, these factors are related to the level of individual income, poverty, income distribution, unemployment and precarious employment (see Papadakis et al, 2022), education, training and lifelong learning, housing, health, insurance and employment that satisfies both material and psychosocial needs. The achievement of these goals-factors can only be realized if there is a level of social justice that implies fairness in terms of opportunities for quality of life and participation in civil society (Nussbaum & Sen, 2002; Löffler, 2004).

The next level for achieving social sustainability is social consistency, i.e. social integration through participation in social networks and voluntary actions where the concept of solidarity is realized outside formal institutional and normative frameworks as part of citizenship (see Papadakis & Tzagkarakis, 2024).

Social sustainability challenges in Southern Europe: State of play

The economic crisis, the pandemic and the current energy crisis highlight the necessity of the welfare state in protecting citizens from the multidimensional social risks that are being reproduced, multiplied or readjusted. At the international level, the socio-economic context is becoming more complex, with more interdependence and a speed of events that is ever increasing (Schwab & Malleret, 2021), creating new challenges for tackling social vulnerability and enhancing social cohesion. The permacrisis era (multiple crises) highlights that the respective public policies need to be more prepared for phenomena that one might mistakenly consider rare.

Both the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as all other crises that burst the last decades, do not constitute a "black swan" phenomenon but a "white swan" one (Schwab & Malleret, 2021: 34), as humanity has experienced similar situations many times in the past, if one takes into account the historical data of pandemics (Huremovic, 2019). At the level of social policy, permacrisis legacy indicates the importance of an organized, effective and inclusive welfare state.

Indeed, the challenges for the welfare states in achieving social sustainability are quite plenty and some of them concern:

- The promotion of teleworking and new opportunities for trade and innovation.
- The addressing of inequalities especially for those in the peripheral and informal sector - rotational employment, false entrepreneurship, non-formal employment (Nieuwenhuis & Yerkes, 2021).

- The disruption of family-work life balance because the worker tends to be stand-by all the time. The "right to disconnect" and the non-violation of working hours, if respected, can create positive effects.
- The increase of working hours (flexitime becomes stiffentime!).
- The increase in mental health problems.

The above point to the necessity to safeguard labor rights, enhance digital skills, strengthen small and medium entrepreneurship and provide incentives for new jobs in order to achieve social sustainability (see Papadakis & Tzagkarakis, 2024).

Indeed, the afore mentioned argument makes sense as in the coming years, global employment supply is expected to increase jobs related to new technologies, artificial intelligence, digitization and automation, while it is expected to decrease traditional forms of employment such as secretarial support, accounting, administration and unskilled labor (World Economic Forum, 2020).

It is no longer a question of simply knowing some computer and videoconferencing skills, but of combining specialized digital technology knowledge with soft skills (such as problem-solving). Labor markets and economies that invest in this combination can identify opportunities for investment in innovation and, through targeted training and retraining interventions, can lead the workforce in these directions and thus create better leaders in an accelerating new digital age. Otherwise, they risk becoming laggards, something that is going to have adverse effects on economic growth and social sustainability.

Lego flexibility refers to the fact where the production of each product is divided into its component parts. These components are produced in areas where costs are low, quality is high, sufficiency is excellent and the rate of innovation is above average and high (Garud et al, 2002; Sennett, 2006). Each of these four elements brings in different components from different parts of the world that eventually come together to make up the product, which may be a mobile phone, a car, a computer, etc.

Lego flexibility depends on having an organizational form in which multifunctional teams are the smaller units and global competence teams constitute the global unit (Azmat, 2012).

The stake of migrants' and refugees' social inclusion

The refugee crisis of 2015 surfaced the structural inability to draw and implement a coherent and inclusive migration policy at EU level (Papadakis & Dimari, 2023). The security vs human rights dilemma tilted towards the first leading to the (re)securitization of migration Europe wide, contradicting the liberal values of the EU (Dimari, 2021). The externalization of the EU's migration policy, restrictive border processes, the insertion of the ambiguous – in terms of actual solution provision – hot spots approach and other measures, have led to migrants and refugees' precarity in the whole spectrum of their social inclusion in the EU (Papadakis & Dimari, 2023).

Indeed, the post refugee crisis period a new EU migration policy began to emerge. The five nodes of the transformation of the European (and Greek) Migration Policy (Papadakis & Dimari, 2023), namely, the European Migration Agenda of May 2015, the EU-Turkey Joint Statement of 18 March 2016, the Instrumentalization of the Refugee Issue by Turkey in February 2020, the Corona Virus Pandemic (Covid-19) and the New Pact on Migration and Asylum part of which was concluded in December 2023 impacted several domains regarding the social inclusion of migrants in the EU.

Indeed, the international literature on migration strongly supports the argument that migrants and refugees have been a state of precarity both prior to their long journey towards

the EU as well as after their tumultuous arrival. Burawoy (2015) has defined precarity as a state of insecure work and as such of insecure livelihood. Schierup and Jørgensen (2016) focus on many forms of precarity, that manifest differently and in different places, scales and socio-economic contexts, but that nevertheless share specific attributes as far as conditions and capacity for agency are concerned.

Precarity and migration (mainly) intersect with the realist policy frame, which has as its distinctive feature restrictive migration laws posits that persistent migration flows create instability in the European continent (Karyotis & Skleparis, 2013; Floros & Jørgensen, 2020).

As already stated, there is a well established research ergography pertaining to the precarity refugees experience in host states, as international studies have largely supported the view that ‘a refugee’s life is indeed a precarious life’ (Butler, 2006 in Greene, 2020: 6). According to Canefe (2018), refugees are highly prone to engage in precarious forms of employment. Allison (2012) also posits the view that refugees have the tendency to experience an absence of social bonds, connections with others and high levels of insecurity feelings. Janmyr (2016), who focused on refugees residing in Lebanon, argues that the majority of them are in precarious legal position. In addition, Wall et al (2017), zooming on refugees that reside in camps in Jordan, found that they use cell phones to come in terms with information precarity, ie precarity as far as technological and social access to crucial information is concerned and an overall disrupted support in social terms.

Baban et al’s (2017) analysis showcases that Syrian refugees in Turkey are subjected to multiple ways of precarity, with diverse inclusion rights, having also great difficulty when negotiating rights. Ilcan et al (2018), critically discuss the ‘ambiguous architecture of precarity’, of refugees trapped in Turkey, arguing that they move into a peculiar apparatus though which the goal of the provision of protection to refugees generates forms of precarity and ambivalences for them.

As a matter of fact, all the above are reflected in the most recent indicators (OECD/European Commission, 2023) pertaining to migrants/refugees’ social inclusion state that which state that there are currently 54 million foreign-born in the EU, out of which, over one third of immigrants (35%) are low educated. EU wide, the share of very low-educated migrants is triple the number of the native-born. In addition, 62% of immigrants claim they have at least advanced proficiency in the language of their host-country. Settled immigrants are almost twice as likely to report proficiency than recent arrivals EU-wide. As far as unemployment is concerned, the unemployment rates are twice as high across the EU. If highly educated immigrants had the same employment rate as their native born counterparts, the EU would have over 1 million more highly educated people working. Migrants are more likely than their native born peers to be long-term unemployed in around half of the EU. Overall, female immigrants EU-wide have higher education levels than their male peers and 57% of migrant women in the EU have a job against 73% of men and 65% of EU born women.

Another interesting fact is that migrants are more likely to work with temporary contracts in European countries and that the average migrant household income is over 90% compared to EU nationals. The distribution of immigrant income is very unequal as well. Migrants are more likely to live below the relative poverty line of their country of residence compared to EU nationals and are only around half as likely as their native-born peers to own their home in the EU and are more likely to live in overcrowded and substandard housing. Interestingly, around one immigrant in five reports paying over 40% of their disposable income on rent (OECD/European Commission, 2023).

As far as access to health is concerned, migrants report a lower health status than the native-born in most longstanding European destinations and they are less likely to use healthcare and dental care services than EU nationals. Moreover, they are more likely than

EU nationals to report struggling to afford healthcare (OECD/European Commission, 2023). Last, but not least, in the EU, 15% of migrants state feeling discriminated against on the grounds of ethnicity, nationality, or race and as a matter of fact between 2010-14 and 2016-20, discrimination increased in the EU. It is well established as well that younger and more recent migrants are more likely to perceive discrimination. (OECD/European Commission, 2023).

As it can be seen, the transformation of the European Migration Policy, which had a security orientation and led to a more realist frame migration policy making, has overall generated precarious conditions for migrants and refugees in the form of social vulnerability, inequality, instability, uncertainly and difficulty of getting access to and be benefited by the European welfare states, especially in comparison to benefits received by EU nationals.

As such, the stakes of migrants and refugees' social inclusion are high, with a number of challenges, the most pressing ones being the reduction of delays in starting the inclusion processes, the equal rights and non-discrimination policy of member states, the documented assessment of the needs and the financing pertaining to the inclusion of migrants and refugees in the social fabric of the European continent, the support of migrants as a whole in all relevant policy areas, the effective monitoring of integration follow-ups to measure progress and adjust policies when necessary and of course the logical coordination of funding at EU as well as national level. Other crucial challenges pertain to the reversal of current securitization practices, to the control of the narrative as regards xenophobia and otherness, to the creation of national councils on migration policy making, to the use of migration predictions models for proactive migration policy making, to the rationalization of migration data policy in all EU member states and of course, to the move towards a more humane approach to address migrants and refugees, including a set of policies to evenly distribute migrants and refugees in the European continent and the creation of a monitoring mechanism at EU level for the coordination of social inclusion policies in members states of the EU.

Conclusions

The above discussion points out to the necessity of articulating evidence based policy proposals to tackle the fundamental sources of the problems based on the concept of humanism and the actual Welfare State but also on the protection of the environment and the achievement of economic sustainability. Is this feasible though? The answer is yes it is, through various policy actions, such as, for instance, the broadening of the tax base (special tax on higher incomes to reduce inequalities) and the increase of productivity and of the quality of employment. At the same time, the investment in human capital, which allows more and better jobs to be created, could contribute significantly in the achievement of social sustainability (see Papadakis & Tzagkarakis, 2024). Other than that, it is argued here that policy makers should invest into more liberal oriented approaches in migration, which go hand in hand with social sustainability, such as desecuritization strategies (see Dimari, 2021).

Last but not least, it is crucial to point out the emerging, expanded and (often) forced, newly built work "normality" (with the frequent violation of the labour rights of precariously working young people and consequently the serious impact on labour relations) seems to lead to a reconstruction of "work ethics", with (irregular) labour norms prevailing (Papadakis et al, 2021). This situation seems to have led to the creation of a new kind of "precariat" (see Standing, 2014), having as its main components insecurity, uncertainty and social vulnerability, but also the gradual weakening of the "standard framework of biography" (Alheit & Bergamini, 1998: 122) of young people, essentially turning it into a precarious framework of biography.

These implications may be decisive and far-reaching for social cohesion, and the need for a paradigm shift in the labour market constitutes a persistent challenge for the whole public policy complex, including migration policy.

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