

During the COVID-19 lockdown measures, news stories were abundant from various European countries trying to find ways around travel restrictions to obtain migrant workers to harvest crops, process meat or otherwise keep certain industries and essential services afloat. Emerging research shows the overrepresentation of migrant workers in “key” professions during this period also. There has been much study already on how migrant workers are a particularly disadvantaged group of workers in labour markets due to their legal construction as non-citizens, discrimination, lack of familiarity and the lower levels of labour de-commodification they experience. While theories and typologies that help us understand European labour markets and welfare state systems are developed fields of study, the role and place of migrants in the picture has not been sufficiently examined. In this paper I investigate this phenomenon of migrant workers embedded in the low-end of European labour markets, and contribute to our understanding of the institutional determinants of this reality. My research question is to what extent does a migrant disadvantage exist in European workforces, and what are the institutional causes of cross-national differences in this disadvantage. Using EU Labour Force Survey data, I calculate migrant labour market disadvantage scores for 17 wealthy European countries (AT, BE, CH, DE, DK, ES, FI, FR, GR, IE, IT, LU, NL, NO, PT, SE, UK) using multilevel logistic regression. The model includes fixed and random effects, with individual and country level independent variables, all calculated using the EU LFS. The overall sample was restricted to respondents aged 20-64, using data pooled from the 2017 and 2018 rounds of the LFS. The migrant group was restricted to migrants from certain world regions, based on existing theories. The analysis was performed using STATA 16. After controlling for individual level characteristics and a country-level measure of labour-market skill composition, a significant migrant disadvantage was found to exist in all countries. To determine the institutional causes of this outcome, I take the country scores as an outcome, and input it into a secondary analysis where I conduct a fuzzy set qualitative comparative analysis. Given the dense patchwork of mechanisms at work when we talk about European labour market, welfare state and migration systems contributing to migrants’ place in European labour markets, qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) is the appropriate method since it is designed to handle complex causal pathways, and allows different causal conditions to combine to provide a given outcome. The scores of the different countries for these various institutional arrangements are based on OECD data, as well as pre-existing research on the topics. The fuzzy set qualitative comparative analysis was performed in R using the “QCA” package. Preliminary findings point to the importance of a combination of a thin welfare state and a long history of migration as an important set of causes of migrant disadvantage, as well as the combination of a thin welfare state and high employment protection. The combination of a strong welfare state and being a new country of migration stands out as conditions leading to a low migrant disadvantage.