

## A THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL APPROACH TO FOREIGN LABOUR MIGRATION AND EMPLOYMENT: THE CASE OF AGRI-FOOD MIGRANT WORKERS IN DEVELOPED ECONOMIES

Aldona Zawojńska✉, Tomasz Siudek

Warsaw University of Life Sciences – SGGW, Poland

### ABSTRACT

Most of the research on migration has focused on the scale and effects of people exodus from rural to urban areas rather than on rural areas as recipients of migrants, especially foreign migrants. This study aims to analyse employment of foreigners in agriculture and food processing sectors of selected developed countries, with particular emphasis on the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. It first reviews existing literature on ideas and theories about human migration through the history of economic and social thought. This theoretical background lies in the economic, social, health, demographic and integrated theories and concepts of migration that help understand the pull and push causes as well consequences of current international migration processes. Next, this article presents some facts about the employment of foreigners in agriculture and food processing in developed countries traditionally affected by severe labour shortages in these sectors, as well as the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on employers and workers. The results reveal that labour shortages and labour exploitation are amongst the most frequent and relatively consistent issues associated with immigrant workers in the agri-food industry. During COVID-19, these problems were exacerbated and complemented with the workers' health risk due to coronavirus clusters on farms and at food-processing plants.

**Key words:** migration theories, labour market, international migration, agriculture, food processing, foreign workers, COVID-19 pandemic

**JEL codes:** B00, F27, J43, J7, J61, J31, E26

### INTRODUCTION

Human migration is a global phenomenon, spanning all epochs and encompassing many peoples [McNeill and Adams 1978]. It has increased considerably in recent years and is in a state of constant flux in terms of shape, form, direction, and content. International labour migration has sparked a political and academic discourse about its causes as well as economic and social consequences in both host and sending countries. Much of the recent research on labour migration is

associated with rural-urban migration and from developing to developed countries. Less research is about migration from one country to rural areas of another country. In many developed economies, agriculture and the food industry with severe labour shortages have become increasingly dependent on a low-skilled and low-paid foreign labour force. These economies generate demand for jobs that are not attractive to domestic workers but are met by immigrants, and have policies that facilitate the recruitment of foreigners. However, they attract and hire people not only from

poor economies but also from richer ones, as shown by intra-EU labour mobility.

The ‘foreign worker problem’ in the agri-food sector seems to be different than in some other sectors of the economy. Migrants hired here are much more exposed to dangerous, heavy, underpaid, informal, and illegal work.

The study aims to summarize the historically evolving economic ideas and concepts of labour mobility, especially cross-border migration, and to review the situation of foreign agri-food workers with particular reference to the COVID-19 period. We study the recent experience, in selected states, with inflow and hiring foreign labour migrants, mainly in the agriculture and food processing industry. Although we emphasize European countries, we also consider other developed countries.

We will investigate the following questions:

1. Is the farming and food-processing industry in developed countries able to exist without a foreign workforce, especially during global disturbances such as the COVID-19 crisis?
2. How are foreign workers treated and assessed in farms and food-processing plants?
3. What new problems for both employers and workers arose from the pandemic situation?

The article consists of five parts. Following this introduction, the second part looks at the theoretical background for the study of labour migration. The third part explains methodology and data collection. The fourth part presents findings. The fifth part consists of conclusions and suggestions for further studies.

## **MIGRATION – A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Labour migration/mobility<sup>1</sup> relates to individuals whose general purpose in moving is to offer to sell their work capacity in the destination areas. Article 2.1. of the UN Migrant Workers’ Convention defines a migrant worker as “a person who is to be engaged, is engaged or has been engaged in a remunerated activity in a State of which he or she is not a national”, irrespective of his/her migratory legal status [UN OHCHR 1990].

It is well-known from the economic history of nations that their economic progress usually has been associated with the gradual but continuous transfer of people and economic entities from rural-based traditional agriculture to urban-oriented modern industry [Clark 1957]. To social scientists, migration is a social phenomenon, the examination of which sheds light on our understanding of human life. International workforce migration (which we are focusing on here) is a particular challenge to study because it has “nation” at its heart. It has the potential to change and enrich individuals and societies but also to exploit and bring about competition. It raises questions about social cohesion and social divisiveness.

There is no single universal, overall encompassing theory that could satisfactorily explain all aspects of migration, particularly the nature, reasons, and consequences of labour migration. The multifaceted migration phenomenon (including international migration) is often perceived as a multidimensional process that requires an interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary approach to its study. Economics, demography, sociology, political science, law, international relations, health studies, geography, anthropology, and public administration are the main disciplines involved in migration research. Table 1 outlines the selected theoretical contributions of scholars from various disciplines in the field of migration throughout the history of thought (with a predominance of economic theories).

Classical and neoclassical macroeconomic theories perceived the population movement as an effect of spatial imbalances in the distribution of production factors (labour, land, natural resources, and capital), and particularly differences in the supply of and demand for labour. The workforce moves from places where capital is scarce and where labour is plentiful to locations where capital is abundant and where labour is scarce, so wages are relatively high. These theories could explain the phenomenon covered by our study, i.e. the influx of foreign migrants to richer countries in search of jobs in the agriculture and food-processing sectors, which are struggling with the domestic labour shortage.

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<sup>1</sup> In this article, we use the terms “migration” and “mobility” interchangeably. In an EU policy context, mobility refers to movement within the EU, and migration to movement from the EU to locations outside the EU.

**Table 1.** Points of view on migration – the literature review

	Contributors	Assumptions/arguments/drivers
Mercantilism	Reynell [1674] Court [1911]	People are considered the nation's most important economic resource. Emigration is this resource lost. It opposed emigration from the home country because it would weaken the national economy. Maintaining a large domestic working population is best for economic prosperity. The state should ease immigration laws. The markets (e.g. regional wage differentials) that each profession depends on are an important reason for migration.
Mercantilism	Child [1751, p. 146–147]	Emigration to colonial countries "is certainly a damage, except the employment of those people abroad, do cause the employment of so many more at home in their mother kingdoms, and that can never be, except the trade be restrained to their mother kingdoms".
Classical political economy	Smith [1979] [1776, Ch. X]	Support for free labour circulation from employment to employment as well as from place to place. Differences in labour supply and demand as well as wage differentials in different regions are the main factors stimulating migration. Strong migration motives lie in poverty and the wish of every person to provide for himself and his family.
	Say [1880]	Some exception to the free-market model when it comes to emigration.
Classical political economy Theory of population	Ricardo [1817]	Theory of comparative advantage. The international mobility of goods under assumption that both capital and labour do not move internationally. Capital and workers would stay put in their home countries (with perfect domestic mobility).
	Malthus [1798] Mill [1849]	Emigration (especially by colonization) would strengthen the home economy by opening new markets for its products and bringing relief from overpopulation and the unemployment burden. Export of population and capital may counteract the tendency of profits to fall to a minimum. “(…) a judiciously conducted emigration is a most important resource for suddenly lightening the pressure of population”. “Self-supporting emigration – the Wakefield system, brought into effect on the voluntary principle and on a gigantic scale (the expenses of those who followed being paid from the earnings of those who went before) has, for the present, reduced the population down to the number for which the existing agricultural system can find employment and support”. The children of the immigrants of the sending country receive the education of the receiving country and enter, more rapidly and completely than would have been possible in the country of their descent, into the benefits of a higher state of civilization (Mill).
Neo-classical economics Ravenstein's laws of migration'	Ravenstein [1885, 1889]	Migration is based primarily on privately rational economic calculations. The inhabitants of the area immediately surrounding a town of rapid growth flock into it; the gaps thus left in the rural population are filled by migrants from more remote districts (each migration produces movement in the opposite direction). Migrants proceeding long distances generally go by preference to one of the great seats of commerce or industry (centres of absorption). Favourable and unfavourable economic conditions serve to push and pull individuals in predictable directions. Migration increases with economic development. Migration is selective; migrants responding primarily to plus factors at the destination tend to be positively selected, those responding primarily to minus factors at the origin tend to be negatively selected.
Keynes theory of population	Keynes [1937]	An increasing population, apart from technical changes and standard of living, has a very important influence on the demand for capital and business expectations. A declining population would lead to a lower level of effective demand, lower aggregate savings, less capital accumulation, and a higher level of unemployment.
Neo-Keynesian economics	Hicks [1932, 1963]	International migration, like its internal counterpart, is caused by geographic differences in the supply of and demand for labour. “Differences in net economic advantages, chiefly differences in wages are the main causes of migration” (wage differential approach). “When a trade is in a flourishing condition, it draws immigrants to it, and the presence of these immigrants retards the rise in wages”.
Neo-classical economics	Todaro [1969, 1980]	Migration determined by lifetime net income (earnings) maximisation choice made by individuals. People move (abroad) for the purpose of improving their economic and financial prospects. Rural-urban internal migration continues as long as expected urban income exceeds rural income.
Austrian School of Economics	Mises [2010, 1988] Hayek [1976, 1981] Rauthut [2021]	Humans seen as mobile factors liberated to seek their most efficient site of work throughout the world. Free mobility of labour will result in a more efficient allocation of the workforce compared to an administratively organized allocation. According to Hayek, unrestricted immigration would lead to a xenophobic reaction in the host country. Given the removal of institutional barriers to migration, migration will be determined by the interplay between market wages, standard wages, attachment component (fundamental freedoms as being quality-of-life aspects), and cost component (subjective consumption needs).
Dual economy theory	Boeke [1953] Jorgenson [1961]	Dual economy (in developing, underdeveloped or emerging economies) is the economic system divided into two sectors – the advanced or modern sector, which is called, somewhat inaccurately, the manufacturing sector, and the backward or traditional sector, which may be suggestively denoted as agriculture. If the food supply is more than sufficient there exists an agricultural surplus, and labour may be freed from the land for employment in manufacturing.
Dual (segmented) labour market theory	Doeringer and Piore [1970], Gordon [1972]	Immigration is linked to the structural requirements of modern industrial economies. The developed economy is dualistic: consists of the primary market (of high-skilled, well-remunerated, stable work) and secondary market (of low-skilled, low-remunerated work). Foreigners are required to fill job gaps in the secondary segment avoided by the natives.
New economics of (labour) migration	Piore [1979]	Migration is a household decision taken to minimize risks to family income or to overcome capital constraints on family production activities (micro-level decision). People migrate abroad to overcome market failures (deficiencies) in their home country. They intend to come only for limited periods of paid labour and save their money (generate remittances). Industry recruits foreign labour to do work not accepted by the natives.

Table 1. Continued

Contributors	Assumptions/arguments/drivers
Internal colonialism theories	Internal (domestic) colonialization is through forced, involuntary, or selected migration from one area to another (e.g. rural-urban). The movement of peripheral labour is determined largely by forces exogenous to the periphery. There is intra-national exploitation of culturally distinct groups, e.g., urban exploitation of the workforce of rural communities or colonies as well as a cultural division of labour.
Historical-structural perspective	Migration is an outcome of institutional, economic, social, and political forces both in sending and receiving countries. It is a macro-social rather than an individual process, determined historically (with an important role played by colonialism) and structurally (by the global economy.)
Structuration theory	Migration has been traditionally determined by the interrelated individual and historic-structural forces which are interacting with national and international institutions being able to connect potential employers and labour migrants in the entire world.
World-systems theory	International migration is a by-product of global capitalism and the worldwide division of labour. The mobility of capital and the trans-nationalization of production have created new conditions for cross-border mobility of the labour force. Immigration is a natural consequence of economic globalization and market penetration across national borders.
Global capital accumulation theories	New transnational stage in the world capitalism evolution: the rise of transnational capital and the integration of every country into the new global production and financial system, appearance of a new transnational capitalist class grounded in new global rather than national markets and circuits of accumulation. The directions and flows of immigration are determined by global capital flows. The international labour migration process is a lever of capital accumulation in the formation of a global labour market. Emigration is generated not by backwardness and stagnation, but by capitalist penetration in the periphery.
Relative deprivation theory	International migration decisions are influenced by relative as well as absolute income considerations. Sending abroad household members who hold promise for success as labour migrants can be an effective strategy to improve household income position relative to others in the reference group.
Human capital models	Migration costs are a form of human investment. Migration is a decision in which individuals calculate their present discounted value of expected returns on their investment in migration (earnings). The migration of individuals and families to adjust to changing job opportunities improves human capabilities. Workers with training specific to any industry, occupation, or country are less likely to leave these (via migration) than other workers.
Theory of (migrant) networks	Migration can be conceptualized as a network-building process. Migration is a self-supporting process of diffusion and takes place in the context of social relations. Social networks play an important role in initiating and sustaining migratory flows.
Theory of cumulative social networks	The greater the number of present or former migrants a person in a sending area knows, the greater the probability that he or she will also migrate. For each person in the sending area, if they were in contact with present or former migrants, they would also be more likely to migrate than others with identical characteristics.
The theory of circular cumulative causation	International and interregional economic relations involve unequal exchanges; the weak are always exploited by the strong, which means that migration has “backwash effects”. Spread and backwash feedbacks (closed cycles of causation in complex systems whose parts are dynamically interrelated) between labour markets contributed to a divergence of technology levels, labour productivity, and wages in these markets. Migration is dynamic, a path-dependent process influenced at various (individual, family, community, etc.) levels by historical processes. Migration is determined by the expansion of migration networks, distribution of income, wealth and human capital, as well as desire to purchase assets to provide for old age.
Mobility transition hypothesis	A dramatic expansion of people’s mobility was brought about by modernization. “There are definite, patterned regularities in the growth of personal mobility through space-time during recent history, and these regularities comprise an essential component of the modernization process”.
“Healthy migrant” hypothesis	The positive selection of migrants with respect to health. The healthiest individuals are most likely to out-migrate. They enjoy a health status that is superior to those who stay behind. The “healthy migrant” effect is marked by an observed health advantage for migrants compared to the host population, which declines with increasing years since migration.
“Unhealthy remigration” hypothesis (salmon bias)	Unhealthy migrants or migrants who experience deteriorating health have a greater tendency to return to their country of origin than healthier migrants. According to a salmon bias hypothesis, the so-called ‘healthy migrant effect’, referring to a situation in which migrants enjoy lower mortality risks than the native-born population, is caused by selective return-migration of the weak, sick, and elderly.

Source: Authors’ own research based on the literature cited in the table and [Triandafyllidou 2015].

Likewise, the dual labour market theory, which depicts a labour market as divided into primary and secondary markets, suits well for explaining foreign employment in the mentioned sectors that generally offer poorly-paid jobs held by flexible workers.

The historical-structural approach deals with the origin of the costs and benefits confronted by the potential migrant. This approach appears in a variety of theoretical models, including internal colonialism and global capital accumulation. Documented evidence from the employment of foreigners in the agriculture and food industry of some developed countries suggests, and only suggests, the presence of elements of internal colonialism – economic and political domination of one populous over another within the boundaries of the state, which gives rise to economic exploitation and inequality.

Nowadays, most migration is voluntary and has a positive impact on individuals and societies but it can increase vulnerability to human trafficking and exploitation. It is true, however, that global investment liberalization, as well as free movement of capital within the EU, has been an important force for the spread of multinational corporations at all stages of the food chain which attracts the labour force. In the European region, citizens of Central and Eastern European states are especially tempted to move abroad to work in large food-processing companies, as indicated by job offers available, for example, on the Internet as well as many research results [Lever and Milbourne 2017].

The microeconomic perspective of migration focuses primarily on the rational calculus of the individuals (migrants seek employment opportunities that give them the greatest return). Migration flows are the cumulative result of individual decisions based on a rational assessment of the benefits (e.g., life-time income) to be achieved and the costs associated with moving. The migration social networks also play an important role [Bloch and McKay 2015].

In addition to economic, social, institutional, political, and historical factors migration and re-migration decisions can be also affected by individual health status. Unhealthy remigration hypothesis or selective return migration, for example, suggests that foreign migrants who face health problems are less capable of

achieving high productivity in destination labour markets, which could result in a reduction of their earnings and standard of living, and finally lead to making the decision on returning or moving closer to home.

The motives that drive individual decisions to move internally or externally, generally seem to be the same today as they were almost 140 years ago when British geographer, Ernst G. Ravenstein, revealed migration patterns called the “laws of migration” [Ravenstein 1885, 1889]. Having recognized various motives for migration, he posited that employment and wage opportunities were its major determinants.

The reason that people move is determined by factors of attraction or repulsion (pull and push factors). Potential labour migrants analyse pull factors – attractive qualities in a specific destination, and push factors – deteriorating or negative conditions in the place of origin [Gmelch 1980, Kancs and Kieltyte 2010]. This concept rests on neo-classical economics, namely individual cost-benefit analysis. The neo-classical approach views migration as a response to local/regional/national labour market disequilibrium.

Conventional economic explanations for migration from poorer to richer countries (or regions) are based on labour flows in response to differences in wages (or income) and job availability (see for example [Hicks 1963]). One of their implications is that the economic development of both the migrant-sending and migrant-receiving country (region) matters. However, according to Becker, “Earnings may differ greatly among firms, industries, and countries and yet there may be relatively little worker mobility”. This may be due to the irrationality of the labour force and the enormous obstacles they would face in moving, but also to the perfectly rational behaviour of those with company, industry, or country-specific professions such as lawyers, and doctors [Becker 1962, p. 24].

## **MATERIAL AND METHODS**

This paper uses the review of academic literature, scholarly discussions of labour migration, public statistics (Eurostat), content analysis of newspaper and magazine articles, media coverage and official reports on the foreign migrant workforce.

The research performs so-called topoi analysis based on the contents of a set of articles published mainly in the English-language and Polish-language scientific papers and newspapers that address aspects of foreign labour generally, and specifically in the agri-food sector. The topoi analysis seeks to identify distinct discursive models or schemes of argumentation and thoughts embedded in a given text. The Greek word “topos” is that which justifies a line of argument but requires less justification itself because it represents common-sense reasoning that relates to a body of collective knowledge that is shared among groups and communities. A topos is also more strongly tied to concepts than to words constituting a salient part of argumentation. The topoi are often assumed rather than mentioned explicitly in a text [Burroughs 2012, Wengeler 2012].

An analysis is generally done within the framework of positive economics, i.e. it is factual without formulating normative judgments or value judgments. So, we do not provide any recommendations or advice for policy.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

For some developed economies, external immigration has played a crucial role in the development of their labour market. In the EU member states, this current role can be illustrated, for example, by the contribution of foreign citizens to employment growth. Since 2013 in such countries as Malta, Austria, Luxembourg, and Germany foreign citizens contributed more than 50% to total employment growth between the second quarter of 2013 and the first quarter of 2019 [Nickel et al. 2019].

In higher-income countries, farming becomes increasingly unattractive for the domestic population, and agricultural workers become harder and harder to find. This farm labour shortage is often filled by foreign agricultural wage workers, especially in tasks that are difficult to automate, such as planting, pruning, and picking vegetables and fresh fruits.

Also in western European countries, agriculture and food manufacturing, especially meat processing, have for years been one of the industries with the greatest shortage of labour, which is succes-

fully filled by immigrants, mainly from Central and Eastern Europe [Blanchflower et al. 2007, Zawajska 2009].

The EU enlargements from 2004, and the free movement of persons across Europe, brought a vast pool of people from Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria, willing to migrate for work opportunities since in their home countries wages were lower, and the social security systems weaker. As the economies of some of these countries (e.g. Poland) improved, and the need for a replenishable source of the cheap workforce increased, the search has extended across the world to such countries as Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Armenia, Vietnam, the Philippines, Timor-Leste, Georgia, India, and China [McSweeney and Young 2021].

In 2004, when the eight former communist states from Central and Eastern Europe – CEE (Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia) joined the EU, only three of the existing EU members (the UK, Ireland, and Sweden) permitted citizens of new members unrestricted access to their labour markets. Although the UK, Ireland, and to a lesser degree Sweden were initially the preferred destination states for labour migrants originating from the CEE, including Poland, the other countries (e.g., Netherlands, Germany) also hosted them in relatively large numbers [Engbersen et al. 2013, Snel et al. 2015]. The labour-intensive economies of southern Europe (Italy, Spain, Portugal, and Greece) were also driven by migrants arriving from the new member states, although the rapid increase in migrant employment in agriculture in these countries began at the end of the 20th century [Kasimis 2005, Kasimis and Papadopoulos 2005].

Post-accession labour movements were in part a continuation of the migration paths that had already been established before 2004 [Garapich 2008], but also involved significant new migrant groups that did not follow in the footsteps of earlier labour migrants [Engbersen et al. 2013]. For instance, in UK’s rural agribusiness, the economic migration channels of CEE citizens have evolved from labour providers who sourced workforce directly from the CEE region and delivered them to British employers, to suppliers or employers hiring migrants locally through family/

friend networks of people who have already lived in the UK [Findlay and McCollum 2013].

A key feature of the CEE post-accession migration to the UK labour markets was a greater orientation towards peripheral or rural areas (“rural bias”) compared to previous migrations [Chappell et al. 2009, Knight et al. 2014, Stenning and Dawley 2009]. The most common reasons for such behaviour are unique opportunities for migrants created by the rurality, chiefly due to the nature of local labour markets, which can offer agricultural and food processing temporary/seasonal jobs and are limited in scope, as well as the job agencies’ requirements to work in rural areas.

In commercial agriculture, much of the work is on a temporary – usually seasonal – basis, thus it is low-paid. Migrants from less advanced economies, irrespective of their education level and previous work experience, often work in the destination countries in semi-skilled or unskilled manual or agricultural occupations on a flexible basis [Canales 2003, Glorius et al. 2013, Nickell and Saleheen 2015, Snel et al. 2015]. Similarly, in EU states from the CEE region (e.g., Poland), foreigners from outside the EU, including Eastern Partnership countries<sup>2</sup>, are mainly employed in low-skilled occupations in such sectors as agriculture, construction, manufacturing, and domestic services [Chmielewska 2020, Kahanec et al. 2013]. These immigrants have partially filled the gaps in rural areas and the food industry left by the outflow of domestic workers. Similarly, in the US food system, labour immigrants (of varying legal and citizenship statuses) occupy the majority of low-paid jobs [Flores 2020].

The wage differential theoretical approach does well, at least in the case of intra-EU and non-EU-EU migration for agricultural and food manufacturing jobs. Wage rates in western European economies compare favourably to those in eastern Europe (Fig. 1).

In the UK (except Northern Ireland), agricultural workers, including foreigners, must receive at least the national minimum or living wage (NMW, NLW), the hourly rate of which depends on their age. In 2021, its level ranged from GBP 4.62 to 8.91 (workers aged under 18 and 23 and over). Their counterparts in Northern Ireland were entitled to the Agricultural Minimum Wage rates, rather than the NMW or NLW, unless the NMW or NLW rate is higher. They fell within the range GBP 6.95–10.95 per hour depending on occupation grade [GOV.UK 2021, nidirect 2021]. In Germany, which only established a general statutory minimum wage on January 1, 2015, its 2021 rate was EUR 9.35 per hour<sup>3</sup>. Other western economies also applied hour wage floors at relatively high levels: France – EUR 10.48; the Netherlands – EUR 9.82 (employees aged 21 years and over). Spanish government-mandated minimum wage for domestic workers was EUR 7.04 per hour, while for contingent and temporary workers – EUR 44.99 per day (= ca EUR 5.62 per hour). In Norway, everyone over 18 years of age permanently employed unskilled within agriculture and horticulture had a statutory hourly wage of NOK 149.30 (ca EUR 15) per hour. Skilled workers were eligible for a minimum supplement of NOK 13 per hour. For seasonal (harvesting) workers this rate was generally lower (NOK 129.40–149.30) and conditioned on the period of employment [Norsk Arbeidsmandsforbund 2021]. For comparison, in CEE countries, the minimum hourly wage rates in 2021 amounted for: Poland PLN – 18.30 (ca GBP 3.65 or EUR 4.20); Romania – RON 13.58 (GBP 2.34, EUR 2.7); Bulgaria – BGN 3.92 (GBP 1.70; EUR 2.0); and Ukraine UAH 28.31 (GBP 0.8; EUR 0.9) [wageindicator.org 2020].

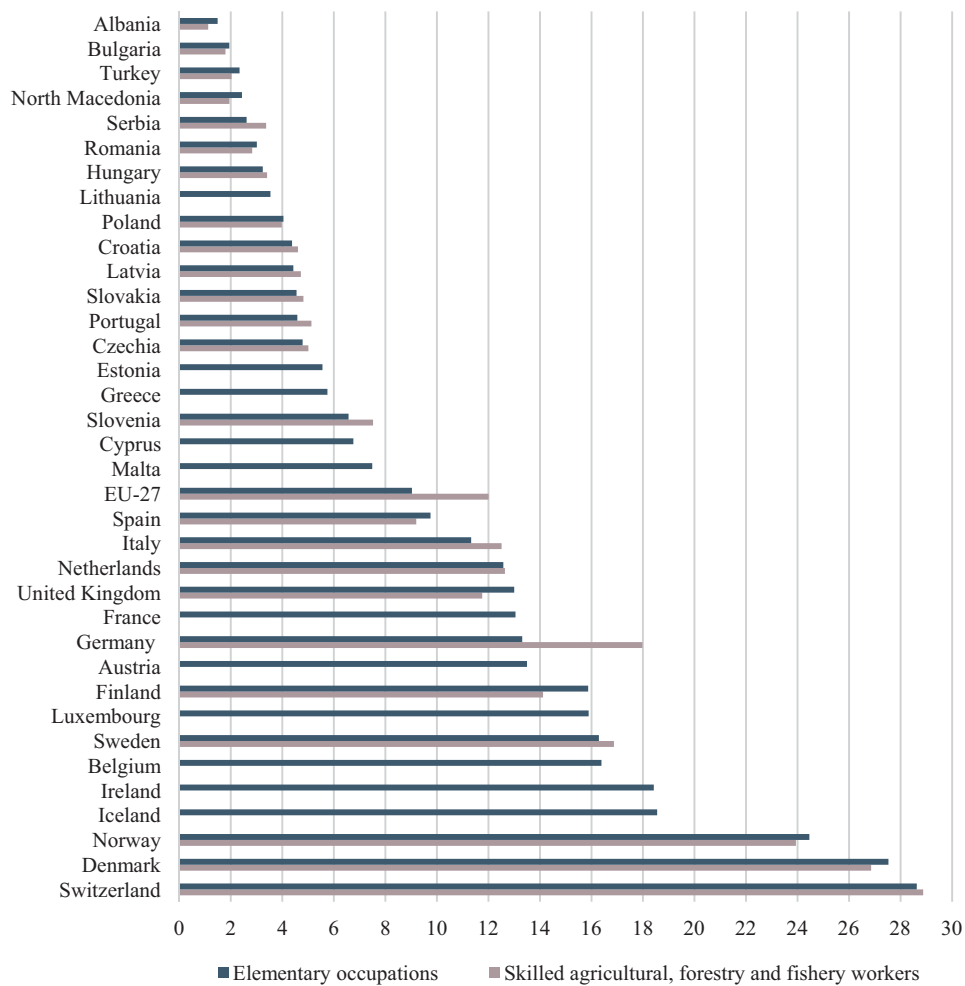
Presented numbers show that official wage differentials between western and eastern economies can be significant push and pull factors for labour migration decisions<sup>4</sup>. However, in various developed countries,

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<sup>2</sup> Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.

<sup>3</sup> In Germany, until the end of 2017, wages below the statutory minimum wage were allowed in sectors covered by collective agreement such as meat processing, hairdressing, agriculture, temporary agency work, textiles and clothing and industrial laundries [Bruttel 2019].

<sup>4</sup> Earning income was not the sole pull factor of migrant seasonal agricultural workers to the UK. Other drivers behind their decisions included learning opportunities about modern agricultural techniques and British culture [Akay Bayraktar 2016]. The availability of affordable housing in rural areas also was an important determinant of labour supply for food processing and agriculture [Ruhs and Anderson 2010].



\* elementary occupations involve the performance of simple and routine tasks which may require the use of hand-held tools and considerable physical effort; they include: Cleaners and Helpers; Agricultural, Forestry and Fishery Labourers; Labourers in Mining, Construction, Manufacturing and Transport; Food Preparation Assistants; Street and Related Sales and Services Workers; Refuse Workers and Other Elementary Workers.

**Fig. 1.** Mean hourly earnings in 2018 [EUR]

Source: Authors' own compilation based on [Eurostat 2021].

the agri-food industry belongs to the economic sectors with a considerable large shadow economy with undeclared work [Binford 2013, Schneider 2014, GUS 2015, Flores 2020, Sawicka et al. 2021]. Thus, official wage rates can be generally higher than their actual levels in the shadow economy.

Informal recruitment in agriculture is common with regard to the immigrant workforce. Some newcomers may be more likely than domestic workers to enter the informal market because of their weaker position in the formal economy or, eventually, due

to relatively larger net wages than in the registered economy. Some employers, in turn, may seek illegal labour migrants to fill in their vacancies quickly and cheaply as well as to minimise labour costs. Unfortunately, irregular migration status increases the risk of forced labour and labour exploitation [Amnesty International 2012] as it is easier to profit from immigrants' vulnerable condition.

According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), in 2016, out of the 24.9 million people employed in any form of forced labour, 16 million



were victims of forced labour exploitation in domestic work, construction, manufacturing, and agriculture – economic sectors with a large number of migrant workers. In agriculture and fishing sectors, 12% of identified forced labour exploitation cases occurred [International Labour Organization 2017].

A characteristic of irregular work is the existence of labour providers and recruitment agents, usually responsible for the payment and working conditions of the employed. Another characteristic is the gangmaster system that comprises people trafficking, health and safety violations, financial exploitation, housing abuse, lack of holiday and/or sickness benefits, daily dismissals, and other violations of labour and human rights [Strauss 2013].

Illegitimate job agents (gangmasters) have been documented to be widely responsible for the typical range of abuse such as late payment or non-payment of wages, restrictions on physical movement, debt-bondage, deception, violence, intimidation, threats, and excessive overtime.

To illustrate, recently, above 70% of all adults forced to work globally in agriculture, domestic work, and manufacturing were held in debt bondage (debt slavery) – their labour was demanded by employers or recruiting agencies as a means of loan repayment. Cases of these and other abuses in the agricultural sector have been extensively documented both in developing and developed countries [Lawrence 2016, International Labour Organization 2017].

In the EU, in general, and especially in its western and southern regions, the agri-food sector belongs to the main economic sectors receiving undocumented foreign migrant laborers. The gangsters who employ, recruit and organize groups of people to work on farms and at food factories play a particular role in providing such irregular workers. They exploited dozens of vulnerable people, controlling their wages and placing them in sub-standard accommodation [GLAA 2020a].

In the UK, for instance, in earlier years, gangmasters recruited flexible labour from the poorest rural areas of the former Soviet bloc, then Latvian, Lithuanian, and Russian citizens who were desperate enough to tolerate low pay and long working hours [Lawrence 2016], then Romanian and Bulgarian workers. In Italy, in 2018, of 2.66 million employees in irregular

positions, 18.8% were in agriculture. The “Agromafie e caporalato report” reveals the 2018–2020 situation on the exploitation of Italian and overseas workers within the agri-food sector; misleading employment contracts, which significantly penalize a significant proportion of workers as well as frauds to the detriment of workers in all areas of production, which together form the value chain of the entire sector [Osservatorio Placido Rizzotto 2020]. Such worrying cases of exploitation, unsafe working, and squalid living conditions on farms and at factories in several countries refer not exclusively to illegal migrants but also those with legal status [Ethical Trading Initiative 2015, Austin 2016, Zawojska 2016].

As we present later in this section, there are a variety of answers to the questions posed in this article’s introduction about the foreign agri-food workforce. Tables 2 to 4 summarize coverage of issues on migrants and their work in hosting countries overviewed in journals, newspapers, grey literature, and other sources.

The responses found in the different source contents toward the importance of foreign migrant labour in agriculture and food processing have been various and sometimes very polarized, but generally quite positive. The analysis of the key topoi in the quoted articles and documents shows that they contain elements of economic, social and humanitarian discourse. Labour migrations from less prosperous economies to richer ones and employment of foreigners are most often described as having the logic of economic rationality (following the theoretical foundations).

Although the topos of foreign labour as a threat to the competitiveness of domestic workers and technological progress is sometimes put forward in public discourse, generally the agri-food sector in the developed countries seems not to be a subject to such allegations. In the presence of labour shortages, a cheap, flexible, hard-working, and productive labour force from abroad is welcomed to match the needs and requirements of local employers and save the domestic farms and companies from losses and even bankruptcy.

In addition to the “labour shortage” topos, we identified the “labour exploitation” topos. The COVID-19 pandemic, more than ever, has exposed a crisis in the rights of agri-food workers (“modern slavery”) across

**Table 2.** Is the farming and food-processing in developed countries able to exist without a foreign workforce, especially during the COVID-19 crisis?

Source	Country	
Chappell et al. [2009]	UK	In agriculture, the balance of evidence appears to suggest that in many sub-sectors (e.g. horticulture) the potential for replacing labour with technology has been exhausted. It seems unlikely that a UK-based labour supply, and possibly an EU-based supply, will be available in the medium term.
Findlay and McCollum [2013]	UK	Rural employers rely on migrant labour as they struggle to source labour regardless of prevailing conditions (boom or bust) in the wider economy. Eastern Europeans are essential to the functioning of the agricultural sector since it is not possible to source the labour locally.
Ruz and Steven [2016]	UK	Farmer opinion: UK agriculture cannot exist without foreign labour. We have not got enough staff of our own.
Green [2020]	UK	Immigration is not an optimal solution to farm labour shortages. Importing seasonal labour perpetuates low agricultural productivity and denies opportunities to British workers who are unemployed or seeking part-time jobs. To reduce the sector's dependence on migrants, the UK should aim to emulate the Dutch example by focusing on technological innovation. Many UK workers are keen and ready to take farming jobs provided they are paid enough and offered flexible and attractive working conditions. Pay a decent wage and you will attract domestic talent.
O'Carroll [2016]	UK	British Summer Fruits: "All first-world economies employ foreigners to pack and plant fruit. This is not unique. Canada, Australia even Spain employs migrants because their own citizens don't want to do the work". Britons "do not want to get up at 6am and work on their hands and knees all day."
Parliament UK [2020]	UK	The edible horticulture seasonal harvesting labour is almost entirely (99%) foreign labour, mostly from the eastern EU region. Undersupply of seasonal and temporary labour could lead to transferring agricultural and food processing production overseas. The National Farmers Union expresses "real concern amongst growers that they will not be able to secure the workforce they need for next years' harvest".
Sargent and Cheresheva [2020]	Ireland	Fears for migrant workers who carry the load of the domestic horticulture boom.
Donaldson [2015]	France	Farmer opinion: "Without migrants, European agriculture will not survive".
Hampel et al. [2018]	Germany	Agriculture has economic importance for Brandenburg, therefore, securing a skilled labour supply is crucial. The agricultural sector is undergoing some degree of reorientation in terms of main products and consumers, coupled with significant forecasted labour shortages that have potentially already impacted the increasing incidence of seasonal work.
Corrado and Palumbo [2020]	EU	The restrictions on borders and mobility during the pandemic, which immobilized thousands of foreign seasonal workers from EU and non-EU countries, resulted in agricultural labour shortages and losses in production (Germany, Italy, Spain, Holland, Sweden).
Corrado and Palumbo [2020]	Italy	National farmers' organisations sounded the alarm on labour shortages due to border restrictions, especially of CEE workers (chiefly Romanians, Poles and Bulgarians). This has highlighted the dependence of the agri-food sector on cheap and flexible migrant labour.
ANSA [2021]	Italy	Foreign workers in agriculture have become important strategically. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the sector suffered because it lacked seasonal manpower.
Corrado and Palumbo [2020]	Holland	To address labour shortages in selected sectors as a result of the COVID-19 lockdowns, workers from Romania and Hungary were flown in, largely for employment in the asparagus and strawberry harvest.
Strzelecki [2016]	Poland	Due to cheaper workers from Ukraine the production costs can be reduced, which in turn allows Polish farmers to maintain or improve market competitiveness.
Rosenblatt [2021]	USA	In Pennsylvania, according to many farmers, local workers are not interested in taking on available jobs. Sourcing labour has become much more difficult since its shortages hit other industries as the COVID-19 pandemic shutdowns ease.
Haley et al. [2020]	Canada	Migrants are essential workers due to the central role they play in supporting farmers and the food supply. During COVID-19 they face greater vulnerabilities.
EMN [2020]	Poland	The COVID-19 pandemic revealed that Polish farmers lacking seasonal workers bear the costs and losses. Ukrainians, who are the vast majority of foreigners in Poland, left for their homeland, and some of them have never returned. This proves that the domestic agricultural sector is highly dependent on the supply of foreign workers.

Source: Authors' own research based on the literature cited in the table.

**Table 3.** How are foreign workers treated and assessed at farms and food-processing plants?

Source	Country	
EFFAT [2016]	Europe	Worrying cases of migrant agricultural workforce exploitation, lack of decent housing, working and living conditions.
McSweeney and Young [2021]	Europe	The European meat industry has been hiring thousands of workers through subcontractors, agencies, and bogus cooperatives for lower wages and worse conditions. It has become a global hotspot for flexible outsourced workers. Many of them have been foreigners earning 40–50% less than staff directly employed in the same factories.
Ruz and Steven [2016]	UK	The Bulgarian worker has always felt welcome on the farm. His employers have done a lot for him; they have paid for his agricultural courses and helped him move into a cottage nearby, along with other Bulgarians. But he does not think that many of the English workers like Bulgarian workers.
MAC [2014]	UK	Compared with local workers, migrants are more willing to work hard and wish to work many shifts and extra hours to earn as much as they can. They are more reliable and productive, and less likely to be trade union members.
Morris [2016]	UK	Polish seasonal migrant: “The money is good and I can see that the farm appreciates me coming. I feel a link with this area. I feel part of the business, part of the team. I feel a connection with the countryside here and with English people”
GLAA [2020b]	UK	About 200 Romanian and Bulgarian farm workers employed on a farm in Cambridgeshire during the COVID-19 pandemic, interviewed by officers from the Gangmasters and Labor Abuse Authority, expressed their satisfaction with the working conditions, training and proper treatment.
Sargent and Cheresheva [2020]	Ireland	Long working hours, low rates of pay, poor working conditions, lack of suitable accommodation for foreign nationals working in the horticulture industry.
Chang et al. [2021]	USA	The US meat industry is an increasingly dangerous, low-paying industry employing a large number of immigrants. The precarious work conditions in meatpacking, and lack of labour protections, were decades in the making. This industry had worked to take bargaining power away from workers to create an industry treating workers as disposable parts of an assembly line.
NFWM [2021]	USA	Farm workers are some of the most oppressed workers in the US. In some cases, they are subject to physical and psychological abuse in the fields. In the worst and most extreme cases, they live in conditions constituting modern-day slavery.
Beaumont [2021]	Canada	Immigrant farmworkers are often brought with visas that are tied to specific employers, which creates a constant fear of being sent home for complaining about working conditions and mistreatment by employers. Because of this, they often endure dangerous conditions, with poor access to healthcare and little government oversight. And when COVID-19 brought sickness, panic, and lockdowns, a bad situation only became worse.
Dahm [2021]	Germany	Seasonal agricultural workers (the majority of whom came from Romania, Poland, Croatia, Ukraine, Bulgaria, and Georgia) are exposed to numerous violations of labour rights, inter alia, through incomplete wage payments and excessive wage deductions, a lack of social and health insurance, and inadequate housing.
Evans and O’Connor [2021]	UK	Workers on the Seasonal Workers Pilot, from 2021 the main way for migrant farmworkers to enter the UK, cannot change jobs freely. They can only change roles with the help of the same agencies that brought them over, and cannot seek work in other industries.
Evans and O’Connor [2021]	Scotland	The workers on the farm were on zero-hour contracts, which do not guarantee any work, and were paid for the amount of picked fruit. Under the law, pickers on this “piece rate” system must be “topped up” to hourly minimum wage of GBP 8.72 if they have not picked enough to earn this rate. Because of this, the supervisors would check everyone’s work every two hours, and the workers who had not picked fast enough would be sent back for the rest of the day, unable to earn any more money.

Source: Authors’ own research based on the literature cited in the table.

**Table 4.** What new problems for both employers and workers arose from the pandemic situation?

Source	Country	
colombi [2021]	EFFAT countries	As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to unfold, migrant workers, especially undocumented ones, are encountering many barriers in accessing vaccines, which reflects many other and broader obstacles in accessing health care and social protection.
Palumbo and Corrado [2021]	Italy	Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis, it has been clear that essential economic sectors suffer from shortage of rights for workers.
Burcu [2021]	UK	The COVID-19 pandemic has made migrant (Bulgarian and Romanian) workers in the UK agri-food more vulnerable to labour exploitation (emotional abuse, threats, lack of payslips, work below the minimum wage, no allowance to take holiday, no holiday pay, wages withheld, physical abuse). Income reduction caused by COVID-19, through furlough or reduced working hours, forced many workers to borrow money to cover basic expenses. This added to the debts that many workers already had before coming to the UK. Too many employees in the workplace at once, not observing social distancing.
euomeat [2021]	Germany	In 2020, the Toennies – meat producer was embroiled in a nationwide scandal due to a huge coronavirus outbreak, when one of its meatpacking plants was ordered to shut after more than 1,500 workers tested positive for COVID-19. The outbreak, the country’s biggest at the time, led to criticism of the company’s use of low-paid contract workers from eastern Europe and claims that their working environment failed to prevent the spread of the coronavirus.
Dahm [2021]	Germany	COVID-19 measures were violated by employers, the state rarely inspected farms.
Galindo [2020]	Belgium	Hundreds of workers in a meatpacking plant in the Flemish Staden have been placed in quarantine after a coronavirus cluster was detected in the factory of the Westvlees company.
RTÉ [2020]	Denmark	Meat giant Danish Crown has closed a large slaughterhouse in Ringsted, after nearly 150 employees tested positive for the COVID-19. All the employees had to quarantine.
BHRRRC [2021]	Italy	The situation for migrant farmhands working in the fields on the Gioia Tauro plain is desolate. Tent camps where workers live have become “shantytowns”.
Mrzygłocka [2020]	Poland	In the Animex production plants, SARS-CoV-2 was confirmed among manpower working there but hired by an agency providing a work service for the meat plant. Virus transmission began in places where employees lived and worked together.
Haley et al. [2020]	Canada	While Canada tightened its borders and restricted entry of most foreign nationals, temporary migrant workers in the agricultural industry and food-processing were among those permitted entry.
Grant and Baum [2020]	Canada	The pandemic has exposed the poor working and living conditions that some migrants face as they support the Canadian food system. In Ontario alone, above 1,300 migrant farmworkers have been infected with COVID-19, and contracted the virus locally. Agriculture employers in several provinces were restricting the movement of foreign workers, not allowing them to leave the premises.
Hjalmarson [2021]	Canada	Undocumented people and many migrants, including farmworkers, who do not have social insurance numbers were excluded from the “Canada Emergency Response Benefit”, which is to offer vital income support to those temporarily out of work as a result of COVID-19.
Chang et al. [2021]	USA	The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) failed to adequately carry out its responsibility for enforcing worker safety laws at meatpacking plants across the country, resulting in preventable infections and deaths.

\* EFFAT – the European Federation of Food, Agriculture, and Tourism Trade Unions.

Source: Authors’ own research based on the literature cited in the table.

the globe, shedding more light on unsafe and exploitative working and employment conditions throughout the farming and meat industries (e.g., in abattoirs in Germany, the Netherlands, France, the USA); horrible living conditions (e.g., overcrowded accommodation for migrant workers often provided with employment); illegal subcontracting with puppet employment agencies, allowing actual employers to evade responsibility for working conditions and avoid paying social security contributions.

Another important topos is the “health risk” for workers related to the coronavirus outbreaks. As countries sought to reactivate their economies by sending people back to work, farm placements and food manufacturing plants emerged as breeding grounds for coronavirus clusters. Meat plants had to be shut down in the US, Germany, the UK, France, Spain, the Netherlands, and other countries after clusters of the coronavirus emerged, often soon after staff returned to work. The uncertainty caused by COVID-19 and the need to earn an income in the absence of health insurance, earnings protection, and welfare benefits may even have led some workers to hide symptoms of infection for fear of losing their jobs [ICMC 2020, Pitu and Schwartz 2020].

## CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the following conclusions are drawn:

1. The present immigration of labour to developed countries from less prosperous ones is best explained by neoclassical economics, the new economics of labour migration, dual labour market theories, and world-systems theory. Differences in labour demand and large wage disparities, especially between national economies of western and eastern Europe, continue to be the main reason for the international movement of workers in search of jobs and income in agri-food.
2. Agri-food sector employers in developed countries generally prefer to employ foreign workers (particularly unskilled, seasonal and temporary) over domestic workers since the natives are less likely than incomers (or not likely at all) to accept low wages and bad working conditions, as well as less

often meeting employer demands in terms of work ethics, motivation and mobility.

3. As agriculture and food-processing belong to the most hazardous industries and, in many cases (e.g. picking fruits and vegetables, piece manual work at factories), require from workers long hours of physical activity in hard and harsh (e.g. weather) conditions, “the healthy migrant” effect is possibly present among immigrants. On the other hand, in many developed countries, undocumented foreign migrants tend to be excluded from health services and expected to cover the costs of medical treatment on their own. Particularly during the present pandemic, when experiencing deteriorating health due to virus infection, COVID-19 disease or another, they can have a greater tendency to return to their country of origin than healthier migrants (“unhealthy remigration” hypothesis), provided they do not face restrictions on leaving the host country.
4. Much of the concern about the contemporary agri-food chain arises due to the illegal and shadow employment of foreigners, their forced labour, and exploitation both by gangmasters and employers. Because in most developed countries, low-skilled immigrants, including irregular ones, have a weak position both in the agri-food labour market and local communities, they are involved in unequal exchanges and are vulnerable to exploitation by the stronger (individual employers, large corporations) – as the theory of circular cumulative causation predicted.
5. Further research could look at country-specific policy responses to problems arising in the context of foreign labour supply and employment in agriculture and food processing in times of severe crises such as COVID-19.

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## PODEJŚCIE TEORETYCZNE I EMPIRYCZNE DO MIGRACJI ZAROBKOWYCH I ZATRUDNIENIA CUDZOZIEMCÓW NA PRZYKŁADZIE MIGRANTÓW PRACUJĄCYCH W SEKTORZE ROLNO-ŻYWNOŚCIOWYM W GOSPODARKACH ROZWIĘTYCH

### STRESZCZENIE

Większość dotychczasowych badań dotyczących migracji koncentrowała się na skali i skutkach *exodusu* ludzi z obszarów wiejskich do miast, a nie na obszarach wiejskich jako odbiorcach migrantów, zwłaszcza zagranicznych. Niniejszy artykuł ma na celu analizę zatrudnienia cudzoziemców w rolnictwie i przetwórstwie spożywczym wybranych krajów rozwiniętych, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem czasu pandemii COVID-19. Na wstępie dokonano przeglądu literatury odnośnie idei, koncepcji i teorii dotyczących migracji ludności ewoluujących w historii myśli ekonomicznej i społecznej. Te teoretyczne podstawy zawierające ekonomiczne, społeczne, zdrowotne, demograficzne i zintegrowane teorie oraz koncepcje migracji pomagają zrozumieć czynniki przyciągające migrantów do kraju docelowego, oraz czynniki wypychające ich ze swoich rodzimych krajów, a także konsekwencje obecnych międzynarodowych procesów migracyjnych. Następnie przedstawiono wiele faktów dotyczących zatrudniania cudzoziemców w rolnictwie i przetwórstwie żywności w krajach rozwiniętych tradycyjnie dotkniętych dużymi niedoborami siły roboczej w tych sektorach, a także wpływ kryzysu pandemii COVID-19 na pracodawców i pracowników. Wyniki pokazują, że niedobory podaży siły roboczej i eksploatacja pracowników należą do najczęstszych i stosunkowo stałych dylematów związanych z imigrantami zatrudnionymi w sektorze rolno-żywnościowym. Podczas kryzysu COVID-19 problemy te zaostrzyły się i dodatkowo zostały uzupełnione zagrożeniem zdrowia pracowników z powodu ognisk koronawirusa w gospodarstwach rolnych i zakładach przetwórstwa spożywczego.

**Słowa kluczowe:** teorie migracji, rynek pracy, migracje zagraniczne, rolnictwo, przetwórstwo spożywcze, pracownicy zagraniczni, pandemia COVID-19

