

Filling the Gap? Employer Attitudes toward Migrant Labour in Bosnia and Herzegovina's Shrinking Workforce

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Abstract: Bosnia and Herzegovina has experienced continuous labour shortages over the past decade, especially in construction and hospitality sectors, largely as a result of sustained emigration. This paper investigates employer attitudes towards recruiting labour migrants as a strategy to address labour shortages, drawing on institutional, human capital, behavioural, and dual labour market theories, along with empirical research from the region. Based on a survey of 64 employers analysed through descriptive and inferential statistical methods, the findings demonstrated that legal and institutional issues, especially associated with the Law on Foreigners, significantly shape their willingness to hire. State support and private employment agencies also emerge as important factors. While concerns about language, culture, wages, and bureaucracy were noted, institutional and behavioural factors appear more decisive, underscoring the need for targeted and coherent policy interventions.

Keywords: labour immigration; employer attitudes; labour shortage; migration policy; labour market integration

Introduction

The Bosnian and Herzegovina ('BiH') economy is considered to be a transitional mixed economy that combines both the elements of market-oriented principles and state intervention. The latter is widely considered to be a remnant of the pre-war Yugoslav socialist economic regime (Lapatinas 2014; Rocha Menocal 2011). The country has since been transitioning into a fully market-oriented economy, with gradual progress and significant growth of the private sector (World Bank n.d.). The support of state

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institutions, or the lack thereof, in facilitating progressive administrative and logistical processes for this transition process has tended to further exacerbate and slow any significant efforts in overall economic growth and development. This entails a combination of factors, ranging from outdated administration to the stagnant living standard.

Moreover, the complex bureaucratic, institutional, and ethnonational landscape in BiH continues to hinder the creation of favourable conditions for sustained economic development and the attraction of foreign direct investment. This is reflected in the modest real GDP growth rate of 2.6% in 2024, according to the Central Bank of BiH (CBBH 2024). Similarly, unemployment remains a persistent obstacle for the market, with a labour force survey unemployment rate of 12.6% (BHAS 2024), while the number of registered unemployed individuals was around 322.000 as of the end of 2024 (BHAS 2024). The latest available data on GDP per capita indicates a figure of 45,505 BAM for 2022 (approximately USD 26.500), with more recent data yet to be released (BHAS 2025). Furthermore, industrial production saw a notable decline of 4.09% in 2024 (Focus Economics 2025). Although there was a brief uptick in December 2024 with a 0.7% increase (CEIC 2024), the trend has subsequently reversed, with April 2025 showing a 0.1% decrease year-on-year and a 1.1% decline in manufacturing production. This data reflects on the depth of the contemporary political and economic trends and the issues therein that extend beyond the regime's intricacy.

The complexity of the bureaucratic system is also evident in the underlying issues of the labour market. All these components, along with many other political factors that are beyond the scope of this paper, can be understood as consequences of a system that is struggling to catch up with the rapidly changing trends in the labour market. In addition, the labour market changes and challenges are also a reflection of the insufficient efforts to prevent and combat economic emigration from BiH. Even though emigration has been a “hot topic” for the past two decades or so, the data presented in this paper indicates that more efficient strategies were necessary to maintain the balance of migration trends. At present, it appears that time has caught up with the delayed plans to combat emigration. The time has come to speak about consequences of these failed actions (Čišić 2019).

In the BiH context, we speak of sectoral workforce scarcities, particularly in the sectors of construction and hospitality, arising for different reasons. On the one hand, the hospitality and tourism sector has grown significantly in the last couple of years due to, as the records show, a rise in tourism in BiH. According to the *Sector Analysis of Tourism in Bosnia and Herzegovina – Summary Version*, the country recorded over a million and a half tourist arrivals in 2019, which is over 25% more than in previous years (Činjarević & Pestek 2021). This substantial rise in the workload demand had to be balanced out with the need for more workforce. Additionally, the Tourism Board of Herzegovina-Neretva Canton confirms this demand, noting a large deficit of skilled workers in hospitality-related professions, and urging employers to address these labour shortages by turning to more distant labour markets (N1 2025).

Construction, similarly, faces notable labour shortages across all education levels in this field, struggling to find a local workforce. Data from 2024 further indicates that construction workers are one of the most sought-after categories in the country (Pavić 2022). These findings are further highlighted by policy frameworks like the Development Strategy of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina 2021–2027, which identifies different cases of labour shortages and recommends strategies that focus on retaining local workers, as well as attracting a foreign workforce to stabilize the sectors that are experiencing this crisis (Government of FBiH 2021). To further illustrate the workforce demand, it is noteworthy that the source markets have been shifting from primarily neighbouring countries that are traditionally culturally and linguistically proximate to BiH, to more distant labour markets. The highest number of work permits continues to be issued to nationals of Turkey, Nepal, Serbia, India, and Bangladesh, while the fastest increases between 2023 and 2024 occurred among workers from India (168.3 %), Nepal (88.8 %), and China (39.4%) (ARZ BiH 2025; Migration Profile BiH 2022).

Theoretical Foundations and Empirical Studies on Employer Attitudes toward Migrant Workers

Employer perceptions can be examined from different theoretical viewpoints, each of which applies to the case of BiH in a distinct manner, depending on the lens through which they are considered. The institutional theory, for one, helps to explain how BiH's political, economic, and legal

institutions have evolved to address these sectoral labour shortages. The state's labour laws and policies, the existence and role of labour unions, as well as entry and employment regulations, all significantly influence how foreign workers perceive the country of destination, and how they expect the integration process to unfold. A large factor in this aspect relates directly to employer willingness to hire, including the extent and the conditions under which they would employ foreign workers. The effectiveness of institutions in facilitating or impeding these processes is vital, as they may influence the employers' willingness to undertake the process of hiring foreign workers (Scott 2008). For instance, BiH's historical ties with neighbouring countries like Serbia and Montenegro, where cultural and linguistic similarities exist, have played an important role in shaping migration flows. However, recent shifts in migration routes, most notably a surge of workers from Nepal, India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, the need for new institutional adaptations to address the emerging workforce demands becomes apparent. The shift towards hiring from other parts of the globe signals that these policies may impact employer attitudes, hence why this paper will investigate the perceived effectiveness of the Law on Foreigners.

Moreover, we see how labour is a form of capital, emphasising that employers evaluate workers' value based on their skills, education, and productivity according to the Human Capital Theory (Becker 1964). In BiH, employers seek to fill labour shortages by adopting through a *cost-benefit lens* when considering foreign workers. This means that they need to calculate the estimated financial costs and time spent on recruitment and onboarding. This paper will also investigate the relationship between the employers' willingness to employ foreign workers, and the perceived time and resources spent on recruitment and training. Furthermore, when examining a more psychological aspect to employer decision-making, we turn to the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen 1991), which posits that employment can be driven by three core factors: *attitudes*, i.e. subjective perceptions of foreign workers; *subjective norms*, such as societal expectations of employment, and *perceived behavioural control*, i.e. employers' perceptions of the ease or difficulty of onboarding and integrating foreign workers into the existing workplace culture. This theory illustrates how employers may assess the perception of completing and following the administrative process of recruitment; the emphasis is on the idea that the more complicated, costly, or opaque the process appears, the less likely they are to proceed with the recruitment. Hereby,

there is also an important factor related to subjective norms. We speak of employer behaviour that alters or adjusts based on what they believe their clients prefer in terms of workforce, or how hiring foreigners may influence their customer pool. In BiH, many employers may hesitate to hire non-European workers due to cultural biases or fear of poor integration, which is why this paper examines this issue in detail.

This paper also examines which types of jobs are the most requested in each sector, indicating the types of migrants most frequently employed, which can be analysed into using the lens of the Dual Labour Market Theory (Piore 2020). It presents the idea that labour markets are divided into a *primary sector* (stable jobs, high wages) and a *secondary sector* (low wages, job insecurity). Employers in BiH tend to recruit foreign workers to fill positions in the secondary sector, as hypothesised, since these positions are less attractive to local workers due to the possibility of migrating to Western Europe and earning more than they would in BiH.

Moving from theories to empirical research, a substantial body of international, regional, and local scholarship examines employer attitudes toward migrant labour and their hiring patterns or perceptions. Such an analysis was conducted by Farashah *et al.* (2019), who evaluated evaluations of migrant workers across multiple European countries by various employers and concluded that there is a strong emphasis on workers' culture and perceived reliability over formal qualifications, as well as their motivation to work. Their research highlighted that these assessments may often be influenced by elements other than merely institutional clarity, such as normative expectations. Expanding this line of thought, another crucial factor in perceptions of foreign workers is culture and language. Farashah *et al.* (2023) identify several key qualifications that employers are likely to value in foreign workers, emphasising the importance of cultural fit and language proficiency, especially in the hospitality sector. Limited language skills may exacerbate communication difficulties with both customers and staff, which ultimately can lead to reduced effectiveness. This phenomenon can also be perceived through the lens of societal expectations, whereby customers or clients may prefer to interact with local, or at least local-language speaking, employees. This paper also analyses the relationship between employers' willingness to hire foreign workers and the perceived preference of clients to work exclusively with local staff. Additionally, employer openness to foreign workers, particularly from culturally distant regions, can be influenced by various factors, including labour

shortages, experienced by BiH in many sectors, most notably construction and hospitality, and skill availability, which is particularly limited in the construction and health sectors.

Furthermore, another study by Fang, Zhang, and Hartley (2023) examines employer perceptions and shows how employers with previous experience working with migrants or hiring them demonstrated greater openness to repeating the process. However, they also note that these decisions are often influenced by perceived bureaucratic issues and complications, which may deter them from engaging this recruitment again. Another crucial factor in attitudes related to foreign employment is culture, and research indicates that employers are more likely to hire foreign workers when they perceive them as a solution to labour shortages in specific industries (Facchini *et al.* 2020), which applies in BiH to the struggling sectors, where there is now little solution to labour shortages that exclude labour imports. An additional lens is that hiring foreign workers may also promote innovation and skill development (Görxhani & Koster 2015), which, in BiH, is evident in the mining sector.

Moving from global to local examples, regional research provides more relevant parallels. Vasić, Nikitović, *et al.* (2023) examine employer perceptions in several Southeast European labour markets to assess the extent bureaucratic issues, legal and regulatory frameworks, as well as language barriers often create challenges for foreign workers. As hiring is a two-way street, it is also important to consider how the hiring system is experienced by the foreign workers, in order to fully understand the potential barriers to successful labour market stabilisation. This is further explored in a study by Preljević, Šadić, and Božić (2025), which examines the experiences of labour migrants in BiH, specifically regarding employment institutions, administrative barriers, and overall guidance. Although this represents the perspective of the other party in the employment relationship, this study also highlights that administrative and regulatory issues are crucial factors in attracting and employing foreign workers. Along a similar line of administrative challenges, but from the employers' perspective, a study on organisational and structural challenges in BiH's labour market shows that employers identify bureaucratic difficulties in the recruitment process as one of the major issues, paired with fragmented institutional governance (Gadžo & Repovac Nikšić 2022).

Regional research makes a similar point. In the work of Kovačević (2024) on employer experiences with hiring foreign workers in Croatia, it

is noted that some of the major issues in the process are administrative and institutional in nature. Her work also raises a sociological observation in this regard, namely that although there are institutional and bureaucratic issues present, employers also face and report different cultural pressures and expectations. Similarly, a study on employer preferences by *Bejaković et al.* (2020) demonstrates how Croatian employers explicitly addressed a preference for hiring local workers, even though they were dependent on a migrant workforce to address labour shortages. Finally, the combination of these theories provides the theoretical foundation for this research and informed the development of the instrument used in this study.

Finally, the theoretical aspects provide a crucial foundation for understanding the presumed attitudes of local employers toward hiring foreign workers in BiH and beyond, and the empirical findings provide regional and local sources for comparison with the results of this study. Additionally, although the empirical data on this topic is expanding in the region alongside the phenomenon itself, the research specifically focused on the case of BiH remains under-researched. The aim of this paper is to contribute to this area by beginning to examine the two most affected sectors, the obstacles employers face, and their overall willingness to address labour shortages through the employment of foreign workers. Based on the combination of existing empirical research, which this study seeks to examine using its own sample, and the overall potential influence and applicability of the mentioned theories, this paper explores the attitudes of employers in BiH toward hiring labour migrants, divided into four research questions, each linked to specific theoretical and empirical points discussed above.

RQ1: What factors predict employers' willingness to hire foreign workers?

RQ2: Is there a relationship between perceptions of legal or cultural barriers and employers' willingness to hire foreign workers?

RQ3: To what extent do employers agree with common concerns regarding the hiring of foreign workers, such as wage-related tensions, labour market substitution, and the recruitment burden?

RQ4: Is employers' willingness to hire foreign workers associated with their prior experience employing foreign nationals or with the sector in which they operate?

Methodology

This study adopts a quantitative research design based on a structured survey, conducted with employers in BiH. The survey systematically examined attitudes and perceived barriers to hiring foreign workers in BiH, specifically in 2025, when it was administered. To capture employer perceptions and perspectives, a structured questionnaire consisting exclusively of open-ended questions was administered to a purposive sample of 64 companies across BiH. The sample included an approximately equal number of companies from the construction and hospitality sectors, which are the sectors, which were selected for analysis because they have been the most affected by labour shortages in recent years (Pašić 2024). The sample included companies operating in both urban and rural areas and with varying levels of market engagement, including local, national, and international companies, to provide diverse insights into company practices. Even though convenience sampling was expected due to availability and willingness to participate, the overall sample was, as was noted, purposive. Regarding the sampling frame, we used the official business registers of BiH and the Republika Srpska entity, the Foreign Trade Chamber of Bosnia and Herzegovina², and the Business Register of Republika Srpska³. The use of two separate databases ensured complete coverage of registered businesses in the sectors of interest. These databases provided fully filtered lists of registered firms, including number of employees, ownership structure, sector, and revenue. From these registers, there were a total of 105 companies, 42 from the hospitality sector, and 63 from construction. Out of the total number contacted, 64 employers responded, yielding a response rate of 61%, whereby 29 companies were from the construction sector, and the remaining 35 were in the hospitality sector. The questionnaire was addressed to either the human resource managers or the company owners/managers in cases where a human resource department did not exist. All responses were collected online, with the survey sent directly to the managers' email addresses along with an accompanying explanation of the study.

The questionnaire was designed to capture employers' experiences with and perceptions of hiring labour migrants, as well as perceived obstacles and incentives related to labour immigration. The structure of the survey

2 <https://komorabih.ba/registar-kompanija/>

3 <http://bizreg.esrpska.com/Home/PretragaPoslovnogSubjekta>

was based on existing surveys that address the issue of perceptions toward labour migrants, including larger studies of managers across Europe and Canada and sector-specific surveys of employers' perceptions and experiences with foreign workers (Farashah *et al.* 2019; Fang *et al.* 2023; FWSS 2023). In these studies, the questions typically focus on willingness to employ, under what conditions, evaluation of foreign workers, and issues related to recruitment and integration hurdles. This survey draws upon these examples and adapts them to the local context, including questions regarding local legislation and adapting the sectors. Moreover, a pilot study was conducted one month prior to distributing the final survey to the employers. The pilot study utilised a convenience sample of 20 companies that provided feedback on the survey regarding the length, clarity, and sequence of the questions. The adapted and finalized survey was then sent to 105 targeted companies. Responses were collected using binary, categorical, and Likert-scale items. Key variables included willingness to hire foreign workers, current number of foreign employees, need for state financial support, perception of the legal framework, and cultural integration concerns. Additional variables assessed experiences with foreign hires and employer openness to collective contracts or permanent roles.

The way the variables were conceptualised and measured was informed by the four theoretical frameworks guiding the study. "Willingness to hire" was understood as the behavioural intention component within the Theory of Planned Behaviour and was therefore measured as a simple yes/no decision, reflecting the actual choices employers ultimately make. Perceptions of legal and administrative issues and burdens were based on the concepts from Institutional Theory and captured through Likert-scale items regarding the Law on Foreigners of BiH and the complexity of the hiring process. Cultural and linguistic factors were inspired by both Human Capital Theory and the Theory of Planned Behaviour, and were measured through questions on cultural fit, language proficiency, and client expectations. Prior experience with foreign workers was treated as an indicator of familiarity and reduced uncertainty and was formulated by asking employers about their past and current employment of foreign workers. The need for state aid was viewed as a form of dependence on institutional support and was taken as a binary variable distinguishing between employers who expect subsidies and those who do not.

Combining binary and ordinal variables in this regard was a deliberate and theoretically grounded strategy, especially when dealing with issues that have strong and immediate practical implications. It reflects the manner in which employers make hiring decisions in real time. In practice, the choice to hire or not hire a foreign worker is a clear yes/no outcome, which is why “willingness to hire” was measured as a binary variable rather than solely through attitudinal scale, although this yes/no outcome ultimately results from combination of underlying factors. Consequently, a funnel approach (concrete broad answer → specific details) was employed. The factors that shape this willingness, such as perceptions of legal barriers, cultural fit, or even client preferences, vary in intensity and nuance, and were therefore more appropriately captured through ordinal Likert scales. Employing both types of variables allows the separation of the concrete behavioural choice from the underlying motivations and constraints that influence it. This approach is also guided by the Theory of Planned Behaviour, which distinguishes between the final intention and the attitudes, social expectations, and perceived challenges that contribute to that intention (Ajzen 1991).

The data were analysed using IBM SPSS. Descriptive statistics were used to summarise employer characteristics and general attitudes. Inferential statistics, including chi-square tests and Spearman correlations, were used to examine associations between variables, such as willingness to hire and perceived legal or cultural barriers. Chi-square tests, Spearman correlations, and t-tests were applied because most variables were categorical or ordinal, making non-parametric techniques the most appropriate for examining associations. All original datasets are available upon request, to avoid overburdening the article format.

The analysis was guided by four research questions.

For RQ1, “What factors predict willingness to hire foreign workers?” the dependent variable was willingness to hire (binary: 0 = No, 1 = Yes). Independent variables included need for state aid, perception that the Law on Foreigners is an obstacle, positive prior experience with foreign workers, perceived productivity of foreigners compared to locals (categorical), previous experience hiring labour migrants, and sector (construction versus hospitality). Chi-square tests were used for categorical variables, while Spearman correlation was applied to ordinal variables.

When it comes to the second research question, we asked whether legal or cultural barriers are related to willingness to hire; the same dependent

variable was used. Independent variables included perceptions of the Law on Foreigners as an obstacle, issues with cultural fit, client preference for local workers, and adequacy of foreign workers' language skills. Chi-square tests were used for dichotomised variables, Spearman correlation for Likert-scale items, and t-tests to compare Likert scores between those willing and unwilling to hire.

The third research question examined employers' agreement with concerns and perceived issues related to hiring labour migrants. All variables were measured on Likert scales, including beliefs that foreign workers' wages reduce team cohesion, that low pay deters them, that employers hire only when local workers are unavailable, that additional resources are required for recruitment, and that foreigners experienced poor integration. Descriptive statistics, including measures of central tendency and dispersion, were used.

The final question investigated whether willingness to hire was associated to prior experience or sector. The dependent variable remained willingness to hire, while the independent variables were whether the company had hired foreigners in the past ten years, the current number of foreign employees, and the sector. Chi-square tests were used to examine associations, and independent-samples t-tests were employed where the sector was recoded as binary.

Analysis and discussion

The descriptive analysis provides a foundational understanding of the dynamics of hiring practices and preferences, starting with the types and characteristic of companies. The first aspect related to the number of employees, shows an average of 1.78, showing that most respondents represent small or medium-sized enterprises. Most companies that participated in the survey belonged to the private sector (1.84). Regarding the employment of foreign nationals, the current average is 5.47, though this is accompanied by a very high standard deviation (31.70) and extreme positive skewness (7.545). This suggests that while most firms employ very few migrants, a small number employ disproportionately more. In a similar fashion, the employment of foreign workers over the past ten years shows a mean of 13.55, with a large standard deviation (57.58) and a maximum of 350.

Moreover, employers' willingness to hire migrants is generally low. The mean value is 1.33, with an even lower mean of 1.22 for willingness to employ migrants in low-skilled positions. This shows that labour shortages in BiH may not be confined solely to low-skilled sectors, as is frequently shown in state reports (Agency for Labour and Employment BiH 2024). Additionally, many employers indicated that state aid, in the form of subsidies, would be necessary to support the employment of foreign workers (1.39). Similarly, readiness to extend collective agreements to migrant workers appears low (1.53). In the same vein, the willingness to offer permanent contracts is limited (1.47), suggesting hesitation regarding long-term reliance on foreign labour, even in sectors experiencing severe labour shortages. Regarding specific requirements, diploma recognition does not appear to be a priority when seeking foreign workers (1.39). Following this, expectations of education are relatively moderate, with a mean of 2.06. Employers also perceive the Law on Foreigners as a significant issue, with a high mean of 5.17 and a standard deviation of 1.62, which may indicate broad agreement that the legal framework complicates the employment of migrants.

Furthermore, wage-related questions and those related to labour conditions show contrasting stories. The notion of employing foreign workers is associated with lowering wages, with a mean of 4.45, while statement that wages must be so low that no one would accept them stands at 2.73. These responses emphasise tensions around minimum-wage jobs and the additional burdens on the employers, particularly in light of the recent minimum-wage increase in the Federation of BiH (Government of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina 2024). In addition, most employers agree that foreign workers would only be considered if domestic labour were unavailable, with an average of 5.66. This finding is supported by the correlation between willingness to hire migrants and the view that they serve as a last-resort option. When it comes to general perceptions of productivity, employers rate foreign workers at 3.09 compared to locals, showing no clear advantage for either group. However, hiring processes for migrants are perceived as more demanding in terms of time and resources (mean 5.05). Despite this, experiences with labour migrants are stated positively (4.05), and their language skills score relatively high (4.30). Similarly, the views that migrants integrate less easily or that clients prefer local staff both receive low values (2.77), suggesting these are not widespread concerns among the employers in this regard.

Lastly, the idea that it is important for the migrant workers to possess knowledge about the country they are working in, including knowledge of the language and culture, is regarded as moderately important (3.55). When it comes to the need for assistance from agencies in recruiting foreign workers, the mean is low (1.42), meaning that most companies either do not engage with or do not prefer such support. To better understand the data presented in this chapter, we also conduct inferential analyses that enable us to see different correlations, differences between groups, and potential explanatory factors. In this way, the subsequent section moves beyond surface tendencies to a more rigorous assessment of the factors potentially shaping employers' attitudes and practices.

Inferential analysis

This subchapter presents an overview of different chi-square tests, correlations, and p-values of the relationships between the variables mentioned in the methodology.

Based on the cross-tabulation and the first chi-square test (association between employers' willingness to hire a foreign worker and their need for a subsidy from the relevant authorities), and descriptive statistics related to this relationship, there is a statistically significant association between employers' willingness to hire foreign workers and their need for subsidies. Of the 43 employers willing to hire, 32 (74.4%) reported requiring a subsidy, compared to 8 of the 21 unwilling employers. This suggests that those prepared to engage with labour migrants are more likely to expect institutional support. Pearson's chi-square test confirmed a significant relationship ($\chi^2 = 9.331$, df = 2, p = 0.009). The Likelihood Ratio ($\chi^2 = 9.479$, p = 0.009) and Linear-by-Linear Association ($\chi^2 = 5.961$, p = 0.015) support this result. Although two cells had expected counts below five, the sample size (N = 64) remains sufficient for drawing conclusions. Symmetric measures indicate a moderate positive association. Spearman's correlation coefficient is 0.337, significant at p = 0.007, showing that the greater the perceived need for subsidies, the higher the likelihood that employers are willing to hire foreign workers.

Moreover, after measuring the association between employers' attitudes towards hiring a migrant or foreign national and their views on whether the Law on Foreigners constitutes an obstacle, it can be concluded that there is

a statistically significant association between employers' attitudes towards hiring a migrant or foreign national and their views on whether the Law on Foreigners constitutes an obstacle to employing foreigners. Pearson's chi-square amounts to 16.918 with 6 degrees of freedom and a p-value of 0.010, indicating a statistically significant association between the two variables at the conventional 0.05 level of significance. In addition, the Likelihood Ratio test also yields a significant result (18.893; $p = 0.004$), while the Linear-by-Linear Association (5.703; $p = 0.017$) suggests the existence of a linear relationship among the ordered responses. The descriptive data further emphasise this point. Amongst the employers who showed willingness to hire a foreign worker, 88.9 % "strongly agreed" that the Law on Foreigners represents an obstacle. This may imply that those most likely to employ foreigners are also those who most strongly believe that legislative barriers are an obstacle. On the other hand, within the group of employers who are not willing to hire migrants, the perception of legal issues is markedly weaker, with 11.1 % "strongly agreed".

The correlation coefficients continue this logic. Pearson's correlation coefficient is -0.301, while Spearman's is -0.340, both with statistically significant p-values indicating an inverse relationship ($p = 0.016$ and $p = 0.006$, respectively). Thereby, the more negative an employer's attitude towards legal obstacles (that is, the less they believe the Law constitutes a barrier), the less likely they are to be willing to hire a foreign worker. In the broader context, these results may suggest that employers with positive perceptions regarding labour migration also have greater awareness of the practical challenges posed by the legal framework. In this aspect, the employers emphasise the need to review and potentially reform the existing administrative and legal procedures governing the employment of foreign nationals.

Furthermore, the analysis investigates the relationship between respondents' willingness to employ a foreign worker and their view that foreigners should only be employed when domestic labour is unavailable. Among those employers who are willing to employ migrants, a majority of 55.8% also "strongly agreed" that foreigners should only be employed in cases of little to no domestic workforce. Moreover, 80% of those who completely reject this statement would nevertheless hire a foreign worker, showing that some employers consider factors beyond practical labour-market logic than may be assumed at first. Similarly, respondents unwilling

to hire migrants show the highest support for the view that foreigners should only be employed when domestic labour is insufficient. Notably, 76.2% of those strongly endorsing this statement belong to this group; none expressed agreement in the “somewhat agree” or “agree” categories, and only a few held neutral or disagreeing positions.

Inferential analysis confirms that these patterns do not appear to be statistically significant. The Pearson chi-square test does not show a relationship between willingness to hire migrants and the idea that foreigners should be employed only when domestic labour is unavailable ($\chi^2 = 4.730$, $df = 6$, $p = 0.579$). This is also supported by the Likelihood Ratio test (6.883, $p = 0.332$) and the Linear-by-Linear Association test (1.185, $p = 0.276$), as well as the measures of association which also confirm weak relationships. Pearson’s R (0.137, $p = 0.280$) and Spearman’s rank correlation (0.171, $p = 0.176$) suggest a very weak positive association. However, they remain far from statistical significance. As can be seen, while descriptive analysis reveals variation in attitudes, inferential tests provide no evidence of a significant association in this case.

The results from the cross tabulation related to the association between employers’ willingness to hire a migrant or foreign national and their attitude towards the statement that their company’s clients prefer working with domestic workers over foreign nationals indicate a statistically significant association between employers’ willingness to hire a migrant or foreign national and their attitude towards the statement that their company’s clients prefer working with domestic workers over foreign nationals. Hereby, Pearson’s chi-square value is 14.039 with 5 degrees of freedom, and the corresponding p-value is 0.015, which shows a statistically significant relationship between the variables under analysis. Additionally, the Likelihood Ratio test (18.122; $p = 0.003$) and the Linear-by-Linear Association (9.425; $p = 0.002$) further support with the significance. However, a methodological limitation must be noted. As many as 75 % of cells in the table have expected frequencies lower than 5, which may compromise the validity of the chi-square test, so ideally this analysis should be repeated with a larger sample.

In addition, descriptive data show that employers who disagree with the statement that clients prefer domestic workers also demonstrate the highest level of willingness to hire foreign workers. For example, among those who “strongly disagree” with the statement, 100 % would employ a

foreign worker. In contrast, among the group of employers who “agree” or “strongly agree” with the statement, the majority would not hire a foreign national, 100 % and 50 % in those respective categories, respectively. Correlation coefficients also confirm the negative association between these two variables. Here, we see that Pearson’s correlation coefficient is 0.387, and Spearman’s is even higher at 0.419, with p-values of 0.002 and 0.001, respectively. These measurements portray a moderately strong and statistically significant positive correlation between greater disagreement with the view that clients prefer domestic workers and greater willingness to hire foreign nationals. In other words, the lower the perception of client resistance to foreign workers, the greater the likelihood that an employer will be open to hiring them.

The results exploring the relationship between employers’ willingness to hire a migrant or foreign national and their views on the usefulness of knowledge of the language and culture of the migrant workers’ country of origin for establishing business contacts with companies from those countries indicate that at the descriptive level, employers who recognise the value of migrants’ linguistic and cultural competences show a stronger willingness to employ them. For instance, all respondents who “strongly agree” that such skills are useful also express readiness to hire a foreign worker (100%). Likewise, in the “agree” and “somewhat agree” groups, positive attitudes towards hiring are predominant. On the other hand, sceptical employers show the opposite trend: 66.7% of those who “somewhat disagree” and 41.7% of those who are neutral indicated they would not employ a foreign worker. These patterns suggest a clear association between valuing migrants’ competencies as valuable and the willingness to hire.

Inferential tests, however, do not confirm statistical significance. The Pearson chi-square test ($\chi^2 = 7.554$, $df = 6$, $p = 0.273$) does not show any relationship despite the descriptive trend. Similar results are observed from the Likelihood Ratio ($\chi^2 = 10.893$, $p = 0.092$) and the Linear-by-Linear Association ($\chi^2 = 2.831$, $p = 0.092$). Moreover, Spearman’s coefficient (-0.166 , $p = 0.191$) and Pearson’s R (-0.212 , $p = 0.093$) indicate weak negative associations, but both remain statistically insignificant. We can say that although descriptive results show a strong tendency linking cultural and linguistic appreciation with willingness to hire, the inferential analyses do not confirm that this relationship is generalisable. The discrepancy may

reflect the limited scope of the sample, restricted to the construction and service sectors.

The next output explores the relationship between employers' willingness to hire a migrant or foreign national worker and the number of such workers they have employed in the past ten years. The descriptive data suggest that employers who reported having hired foreign workers in the last ten years are more likely to express willingness to do so again. Among those who stated they would hire a migrant or foreign national worker; there is a noticeable distribution across all categories of prior employment of foreign workers. In contrast, the group of employers who would not hire such workers is concentrated entirely in the category of zero previous employment of foreign workers. This pattern suggests a potential connection between past hiring practices and current perceptions towards migrant employment. However, Pearson's chi-square value is 9.126, showing a significance of 0.610, reflecting the insignificance of the result. A similar conclusion is drawn on the basis of the Likelihood Ratio test (13.320 with a p-value of 0.273), and the Linear-by-Linear Association ($\chi^2 = 1.670$, $p = 0.196$). These results suggest that, even though a pattern is observable at the descriptive level, it is not statistically robust.

On the other hand, the symmetric measures show mixed findings. Pearson's R shows a weak negative correlation of -0.163 with a p-value of 0.199, indicating no statistically significant relationship between the variables. However, Spearman's rank correlation shows a stronger and significant negative association ($\rho = -0.350$, $p = 0.005$). This means that when considered as ordinal variables, there is a clear and meaningful relationship between the number of foreign workers employed and the willingness to hire such workers, which was not the case previously. In essence, as the number of previously employed labour migrants decreases, the likelihood of expressing willingness to hire a labour migrant also decreases. Regarding the relationship between employers' willingness to hire a migrant worker and the number of foreign nationals they currently employ, the descriptive data show that employers already hiring foreigners are more likely to continue doing so, reflecting reported positive experiences. Across all non-employment categories, ranging from one or two foreign workers to as many as 250, most respondents report a willingness to employ migrants. In contrast, those employers who do not currently employ any foreign workers are more divided: 17 respondents expressed openness to hiring,

while 19 stated the opposite, making reluctance slightly more common in the no-employment group. This distribution suggests a potential relationship between current hiring practices and openness to migrant labour.

Inferential analysis, however, does not confirm such a connection. The Pearson chi-square test ($\chi^2 = 5.116$, $df = 7$, $p = 0.646$), the Likelihood Ratio ($\chi^2 = 7.138$, $p = 0.415$), and the Linear-by-Linear Association ($\chi^2 = 0.867$, $p = 0.352$) all exceed the 0.05 benchmark, showing no significant association. Symmetric measures confirm the absence of significance. Pearson's correlation (-0.117 , $p = 0.356$) and Spearman's rank correlation ($\rho = -0.131$, $p = 0.302$) both reveal weak negative associations between current employment of foreign workers and willingness to hire, but neither reaches statistical significance. While descriptive results suggest that employers with prior experience in hiring foreign nationals are more open to employing them in the future, the statistical tests indicate that these patterns cannot be generalised.

Lastly, in the first correlation matrix, looking into the relationship between willingness to hire foreign workers and the belief that the Law on Foreigners is an obstacle, a statistically significant inverse negative correlation is observed (Pearson's correlation coefficient is -0.301 , p -value is 0.016). This suggests that employers who view the law as a barrier are less likely to express a willingness to hire labour migrants. Spearman's rank correlation shows a slightly stronger negative coefficient ($\rho = -0.340$, $p = 0.008$), confirming that this relationship persists when variables are treated as ordinal. These findings imply that the perception of legal obstacles is meaningfully associated with employers' openness to employing migrants. In the second part of this output, the correlation between willingness to hire a foreign national and the perception that more time and resources are required to screen foreign applicants is also examined. Hereby, Pearson's correlation coefficient is -0.237 , with a p -value of 0.059 , and although this indicates a weak negative relationship, it is not statistically significant. On the other hand, Spearman's correlation yields a coefficient of -0.254 with a p -value of 0.043 , which statistically significant. This indicates that when accounting for the ordinal nature of the data, there is a weak but significant negative relationship between the perceived screening hurdles and the willingness to hire a foreign worker. Employers who report that more effort is needed to hire foreign nationals are slightly less likely to express willingness to do so.

Findings and discussion

Research Question 1: What factors predict willingness to hire foreign workers?

The findings for the first research question showcase that some of the factors that influence employers' willingness to hire foreign workers are primarily institutional. One of the strongest and most consistent factors mentioned is the need or expectation of state aid, particularly in the form of subsidies. Here, employers who expressed clear willingness to hire foreign workers also firmly claimed the perceived need for financial aid and general administrative support. Theoretically, we can speak of a clear parallel with one of the points of the Institutional theory, precisely related to the idea that the behaviour of employers' attitudes can be conditioned by the existence of structure and stability in the institutions, as well as their support, or lack thereof. Moreover, when it comes to the perceptions related to the Law on Foreigners, the employers who expressed willingness to employ foreigners were more likely to criticise the mentioned legal regulation, showcasing that willingness persists despite the mentioned issues, as is also supported by the empirical findings of Farashah *et al.* (2023). This may particularly mirror the fact that the labour scarcity is so acute that employers are willing to combat it even through these obstacles, as it appears to be the only way.

Furthermore, there is a partial relevance of the Theory of Planned Behaviour that needs to be mentioned, and it refers to the idea of perceived behavioural control. Those who noted that the procedures were too problematic also noted that by easing the processes, the recruitment would automatically proceed more smoothly. Here, we speak of the notion of TPB that explains how behavioural intention is influenced by the perceived capacity to complete an action. However, beyond this point, the contribution of this theoretical aspect is limited for this particular research question, especially regarding subjective norms, which were, however, examined in the later questions. Moreover, not all results were as clear. We saw a particular ambiguity when comparing the descriptive and inferential analyses on whether employers who have experience with foreign workers would be more likely to hire again. While the descriptive data clearly showed a confirming positive trend, the inferential data were mixed, indicating that some external and structural problems may still deter employers from foreign recruitment, even if they have such previous

experience. Fang *et al.* (2003) have made a similar point, noting that openness to employment is increased with prior experience; however, only when there are little or no institutional or larger barriers present.

Other factors were considered, like perceived productivity of migrant workers, but these did not show up as significant predictors for the willingness to employ. Interestingly, here we see that this finding for this particular sample does not mirror the Human Capital Theory's expectation that productivity and related notions would increase employers' openness to hire foreign workers. In this case, as has been seen, institutional and administrative factors prevail in the extent of the willingness to hire. Moreover, sectoral differences also did not appear as significant in predicting or influencing the willingness to hire. Thus, we see that even though the examined sectors (construction and hospitality) face similar issues related to workforce gaps, the factors mentioned by both sectors overlapped, with both reflecting cross-cutting institutional and administrative issues rather than perhaps some more sector-specific factors.

Research Question 2: Is there a relationship between perceptions of legal or cultural barriers and willingness to hire foreign workers?

The findings for the second research question make a clear point. The perception of institutional issues, particularly related to the Law on Foreigners, and cultural expectations, related to language, client references, and workplace policies and norms, stand out as the two main predictors that seem to influence the willingness of employers to hire foreign workers. As also mentioned in the previous question, employers who stated a higher willingness were also more critical of the Law on Foreigners. The second examined relationship highlights the significant role of cultural factors in the extent of the willingness to hire foreign workers. The results indicate that employers who perceived that their client base preferred local workers were notably less likely to seek foreign workers. The same line applies to language proficiency as a skill; perceived client preference takes priority even over language proficiency. Here we come to a different point of the Theory of Planned Behaviour. These subjective norms related to perceived client preferences carry greater weight in the decision-making of employers than objective norms, like skills. This is further reinforced by the work of Farashah *et al.* (2019), where they explain that decision-making in foreign

employment, although largely dependent on institutional factors, is also significantly influenced by subjective norms.

On that note, some other variables, like cultural and linguistic familiarity, were considered, but they resulted as being statistically insignificant as additional factors influencing the hiring process, which was unexpected after seeing the descriptive results. This does, however, further emphasise the fact that subjective norms may prevail over even the familiarity of language and culture, usually deemed key factors of social acceptance. Vasić *et al.* (2023) also support this finding, showing examples of various European employers, especially in the hospitality sector, who claim to fear that their clients may feel discomfort working with even highly-skilled, culturally knowledgeable foreign workers.

Research Question 3: To what extent do employers agree with common concerns regarding the hiring of foreign workers, such as wage-related tensions, labour market substitution, and the recruitment burden?

As for the penultimate question, the findings show that some employers raise concerns related to wages and workplace integration, although a large majority agreed that hiring foreign workers may disturb wage cohesion internally. Interestingly, this agreement did not translate into a reduced willingness to employ, indicating that need overbalances the basics of cost-benefit assumptions. Moreover, most employers agreed that they would employ foreign workers only when the local resources have been exhausted; however, this claim showed no statistical significance in relation to the willingness to hire. In contrast, administrative hurdles appeared once again as important factors in hiring. Even though statistically significant results through Pearson's correlation were not shown, Spearman's coefficient suggested at a weak yet significant negative connection. This may indicate that the perceived time and resources spent on the hiring process may reduce willingness to hire, although a larger sample would need to be examined for stronger claims. Once again, we may speak of the parallel with some aspects of the Institutional Theory, as well as some qualitative studies from BiH, such as that of Preljević *et al.* (2025), that re-emphasises this finding, but from a different point of view; in this case, migrant workers report that the biggest issues in the recruitment process were the administrative inefficiencies, which also hinder integration, not just on-boarding.

Additionally, variables related to the productivity of migrant workers and their fit in the workplace did not yield significant results regarding the employers' willingness to hire them. Productivity was viewed as a neutral phenomenon, and the screening process was reported as reasonably organised. This finding, once again, brings the question of the Human Capital Theory into the spotlight. Unlike its position that clearly states how productivity and skill levels heavily influence employer preferences, this particular case in BiH seems to yield different conclusions, echoing the work of Vasić *et al.* (2023).

Research Question 4: Is employers' willingness to hire foreign workers associated with their prior experience in employing foreign nationals or the sector in which they operate?

A complex relationship between the willingness to hire and prior hiring experience emerges from this analysis. The descriptive and inferential data reveal different points of view; the descriptive analysis presented a strong influence of previous experience in hiring on the willingness to hire again. However, the inferential analysis was rather inconsistent. The Chi-square tests did not find a significant relationship between those two variables, while Spearman's correlation coefficient showed a statistically significant negative relationship, suggesting that potential connection. In order to make any strong claims for this research question, we would need to repeat the process with a larger and more diverse sample; however, at this point, we can say that there is a reasonable likelihood that the two may be related. Fang, Zhang, and Hartley's (2023) work complements this finding, as aforementioned. Prior experience can become a strong predictor of willingness to hire under the condition that institutional and administrative procedures facilitate the hiring process and ensure stability in its entirety. In the case where this condition is not fully met or to a larger extent, as is the case in BiH, this relationship cannot be assumed. This seemingly vital role of institutional conditions is deepened by the found inconsistencies between the inferential and descriptive findings, once again coming highlighting points from the Institutional Theory.

Finally, when analysing sectoral differences in this regard, it was found that they are low and insignificant, even though we are considering the two most impacted sectors when it comes to labour shortages. Once again, we see the cross-sectional institutional factors that overlap, regardless of the

potential internal differences of the sectors, as was the case in the research by Vasić *et al.* (2023), where most employers across different sectors reported similar issues in the administrative system, resulting in similar, if not identical, behavioural and decision-making patterns.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings across all four research questions emphasise that employers are willing to hire foreign workers and that this willingness is shaped by perceptions of legal complexity, administrative issues, and the general need for state institutional support, as well as the potential involvement of recruitment agencies. Throughout the findings, we see the salience of the Institutional Theory and the Theory of Planned Behaviour, in addition to the partial explanations offered by the Human Capital and the Dual Labour Market theories. It is vital to consider that the sectors were not determinants for the need or willingness to hire foreigners, but rather part of an intricate combination of external and internal factors analysed in this paper, including seasonal and year-round labour shortages, which are the most noticeable in the sectors of hospitality and construction in both the Federation BiH and the Republika Srpska. The descriptive results underscore both the heterogeneity of employers' experiences with foreign labour and the persistence of structural and attitudinal barriers to their employment. However, descriptive findings are limited, which is why this analysis proceeded to a more rigorous inferential analysis.

The inferential findings then point to a small number of factors that consistently shape employers' willingness to hire foreign workers. Employers who expect institutional support through subsidies and those who perceive the Law on Foreigners as a practical barrier appear the most likely to express openness to hiring foreign workers, and both chi-square tests and correlation measures confirm the strength of these relationships. A similar pattern is observed related to client attitudes, where employers who believe that their clients do not mind working with foreigners demonstrate far greater willingness to employ them. Other areas, such as views on when foreigners should be hired, the perceived value of linguistic or cultural skills, the time and resources required for screening, and both past and current employment of foreign nationals, show variation at the descriptive level fail to reach statistical significance. In some cases, ordinal correlations show weak relationships; however, these appear insufficient to generalise.

The results suggest that employers' openness to migrant labour is shaped most clearly by practical concerns about legal and institutional frameworks and by perceptions of client acceptance, while other factors play a more limited or inconsistent role.

Lastly, this study aims to offer several contributions to the scholarship on labour migration in BiH, specifically focusing on employer preferences and willingness to employ foreign workers in the sectors suffering from labour deficits, by identifying some of the main issues and factors that may serve as predictors of an increased willingness to hire foreign workers. By doing so, this analysis seeks to complement the existing research on BiH workforce scarcity and generally broaden knowledge of this relatively new phenomenon in the country. Despite this, we must note that the study was not designed to be generalisable or representative in its scope, rather it is an isolated case of 64 employers in BiH from the sectors of construction and hospitality. Consequently, the study is constrained by sample size and diversity, as well as by the limited depth of the analysis imposed by the technical limitations of the journal. Future research should consider expanding this study to include a larger and more diverse sample but also examine the newest policy changes and regulatory adjustments made in the autumn of 2025, after this study was completed. Such updates to this work could enrich the literature and provide more evidence on this complex but inevitable process currently affecting BiH.

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Popunjavanje praznine? Stavovi poslodavaca prema migrantskim radnicima u uvjetima opadajuće radne snage u Bosni i Hercegovini

Sažetak: Bosna i Hercegovina se u posljednjoj deceniji suočava s trajnim nedostatkom radne snage, posebno u građevinskom i ugostiteljskom sektoru, uglavnom zbog emigracije. Ovaj rad ispituje stavove poslodavaca o zapošljavanju radnih migranata kao strategiji za prevazilaženje manjka radnika, oslanjajući se na institucionalnu, teoriju ljudskog kapitala, teoriju planiranog ponašanja i teoriju dualnog tržišta rada, između ostalih empirijskih istraživanja iz regionala. Na osnovu ankete među 64 poslodavca, analizirane deskriptivnim i inferencijskim metodama, nalazi pokazuju da pravne i institucionalne barijere, posebno Zakon o strancima, snažno utiču na spremnost za zapošljavanje. Državna finansijska podrška i privatne agencije također su značajni prediktori. Iako su primijećene zabrinutosti vezane za jezik, kulturu, nadnlice i birokratiju, institucionalni i ponašajni faktori pokazali su se presudnim, što ukazuje na potrebu za ciljanom politikom.

Ključne riječi: radna imigracija, stavovi poslodavaca, nedostatak radne snage, migracijska politika, integracija na tržištu rada