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**RACIALIZED TREATMENT OF
MIGRANT WORKERS IN EUROPE:
CRITICAL REFLECTIONS AND
RECOMMENDATIONS**

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Racialized Treatment of Migrant Workers in Europe: Critical Reflections and Recommendations

Key Issues from Policy and Research in the Last Decade

Over the past decade, European peripheries have seen a significant rise in the employment of migrant workers within their economies, particularly in labor-intensive and low-wage sectors. While migration is often described in policy discourse as an economic necessity to address labor shortages, the lived experiences of migrant workers reveal a far more troubling reality. Throughout the European Union (EU) – particularly in peripheral countries such as Croatia, Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, and southern Italy – migrant workers face structural racism, exploitative labor regimes, and legal precarity that reflect a broader system of racial capitalism¹.

¹ The term “racial capitalism” was first popularized by Cedric J. Robinson in his seminal work *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (1983).

The intensity of these issues in the peripheries is not accidental but reflects their structural position within global capitalism, marked by dependent economies, labor market deregulation, and geopolitical precarity. Drawing on Anibal Quijano's concept of the *coloniality of power*, these regions can be seen as occupying a subordinated status in the racialized international division of labor. They are often depicted as not-quite-European, not-quite-white, and not-quite-civilized, rendering them more susceptible to externally imposed austerity, EU accession conditions, and IMF-led structural adjustments that systematically erode labor protections. These dynamics create fertile ground for racialized exploitation: migrants are funneled into precarious and unregulated work – construction, agriculture, care, tourism – often without contracts or rights. Unlike in core EU zones, where such exploitation may be partially masked by rights discourses or institutional safeguards, here the ideological veil is thinner, and the violence of racial capitalism more overt. By treating racial capitalism as a lens, this paper examines how contemporary migration regimes reproduce colonial hierarchies under the pretense of economic necessity and regional development.

As part of the research project *Migrant Workers COUNTER Economies in Croatia*, this analysis draws on critical labor and migration studies, EU policy research, and ethnographic fieldwork to examine the racialized treatment of migrant workers and

Robinson challenged conventional Marxist accounts that treated capitalism as a race-neutral mode of production. He argued that capitalism emerged from racialized and feudal European societies, and thus was inherently racial in its logic, hierarchies, and accumulative practices. For Robinson, racial capitalism refers to a system in which capital accumulation relies on the production and exploitation of racial difference. Racialization serves to justify unequal labor relations, colonial dispossession, and the management of surplus populations. This framework has been advanced by scholars such as Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Angela Davis, and Achille Mbembe, who explore how race, labor, and capital intersect in carceral regimes, border enforcement, and transnational migration. In the context of migrant labor, racial capitalism enables us to understand how migrant bodies are both needed and devalued: as flexible, expendable labor, migrants are recruited into economies that depend on their work but deny them recognition, rights, or belonging. Racializing migrants serves as a tool to naturalize their disposability, legal exclusion, and socioeconomic marginalization.

the systemic forces that sustain it. Grounded in critical ethnographic methodologies, the research examines the systems and infrastructures that regulate and exploit migrant labor, encompassing immigration and employment policies, on-the-ground working conditions, unionization efforts, and everyday survival strategies. It draws on fieldwork in Zagreb and selected rural or semi-urban areas, including in-depth interviews with migrant workers, unions, researchers, journalists, and NGOs, as well as participant observation. Emphasizing migrant workers' collective organizing and agency, the study treats these resistance spaces as crucial sites of knowledge production, capable of disrupting the dehumanizing logic of racial capitalism. Rather than merely extracting data, the research is designed as a justice-seeking, collaborative intervention into the economic, political, and epistemic inequalities shaping the EU's peripheries. By engaging with the lived experiences and organizing efforts of migrant workers, the study aims to generate both analytical insight and strategic proposals for democratizing labor regimes and advancing racial and social justice.

Precarity and Hyper-Exploitation as Systemic Norms

A growing body of research in migration and labor studies highlights the extreme precarity faced by migrant workers in EU peripheries. These workers experience unpaid work, delayed wages, limited access to days off or holidays, extended work hours, wage cuts, frozen pay, and the suspension of supplemental income. Migrants are often assigned to the most dangerous and undesirable jobs known as "dirty work," such as construction, warehouse labor, operating heavy machinery, or slaughterhouse work, while dealing with poor infrastructure, inadequate living conditions, and partial or non-existent health insurance (Józwiecky, 2024; Grgurinović, 2025; Tadić, 2025).

This state of hyper-exploitation is not accidental; it is a product of the interplay between migration governance and labor market deregulation. Employers benefit from a pool of racialized, precarious laborers whose legal and economic dependence renders them less likely to oppose abusive conditions. In Croatia, for example, migrant workers have reported being housed in over-

crowded containers, denied breaks, and forced to work 12-hour shifts or longer with little or no health coverage. These practices violate both Croatian labor law and EU directives, yet enforcement remains weak or non-existent.

Reports submitted to Croatia's Public Ombudsman's Office (2025) have further revealed that migrant workers were sometimes housed in storage facilities, cold rooms, apartments next to tool sheds or production halls, and even in converted poultry farms that have been turned into residential spaces. Workers have also reported being employed without valid residence and work permits, not receiving the agreed-upon or promised wages, or receiving part of their wages in cash ("under the table"), which indicates both wage theft and informalization. Numerous accounts detail illegal overtime work, denial of the right to rest, failure to pay compensation for unused annual leave, and refusal to report workplace injuries or to register workers with relevant social insurance authorities. Some workers were never given formal employment contracts, while others faced unlawful dismissals, adding to the precarity and legal invisibility of their situation.

According to data from the Ministry of the Interior (2025), 206,640 residence and work permits were issued in 2024 to workers from third countries, which is 34,141 more permits than in 2023. The highest numbers of foreign workers came from Bosnia and Herzegovina (38,100), Nepal (35,635), Serbia (27,988), India (20,502), the Philippines (14,680), North Macedonia (13,855), Bangladesh (13,630), and Kosovo (8,139). The most common occupations for which residence and work permits were issued included: construction laborer (high-rise), waiter/waitress, cook, assistant cook, bricklayer, construction laborer (civil engineering), cleaner, hotel room attendant, assistant waiter/waitress, and carpenter.

Legal Insecurity: The Politics of Irregularization

The core issue that makes workers in Croatia and across the EU vulnerable is legal insecurity. Most workers are granted short-term, employer-tied work permits, often valid for only one year,

without a guarantee of renewal. The renewal process can take months – or, in some cases, more than a year – during which a migrant may fall into irregular status, despite having previously held legal employment (Bužinkić, 2025). Some employers intentionally let permits expire, further deepening workers' vulnerability and risks of long-term irregular status. The renewal process is marred by bureaucratic opacity, delays, and a lack of transparency.

According to the Public Ombudsman's Report (2025), in 2024, Croatian labor inspectors estimated that as many as 1,002 third-country nationals were working without valid residence and work permits or without properly registering their employment, which is 424 more than in 2023. As a result, inspectors issued 253 temporary bans on business operations (117 more than in the previous year), with 116 subsequently lifted after employers collectively paid €728,647 into the state budget within the prescribed period. The majority of migrants found in irregular employment were nationals of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Nepal, Serbia, North Macedonia, India, Kosovo, and the Philippines. Hospitality and construction remained the two sectors with the most unlawful labor practices, as in 2023. Moreover, according to data from the Ministry of the Interior (2025), in 2024, entry into the Republic of Croatia was denied to 257 third-country nationals at Franjo Tuđman Airport, despite having previously been issued residence and work permits. Of the total number of decisions issued, 250 were due to the cancellation of those permits at the employer's request, without prior notification to the workers. As a result, 32 individuals expressed their intention to apply for international protection after being denied entry to the country.

This irregularization is not incidental. It reflects a deliberate logic of disposability and replaceability, built into a system where each new migrant worker brought into the country through private employment agencies generates profit, not only for the agencies but also through state fees, taxes, and contributions. Rather than investing in long-term labor market integration, the Croatian system has become reliant on a circulatory model

of labor migration, viewing workers as interchangeable units of labor to be rotated in and out. As documented by researchers (Bužinkić, 2025; Grgurinović, 2022; HINA, 2024), this system promotes short-termism and institutional neglect, where neither agencies nor employers are held accountable for the legal fallout faced by workers once permits expire.

The lack of clear administrative procedures, weak oversight of recruitment practices, and the failure to provide adequate legal aid or multilingual support further exacerbate this insecurity. Migrant workers are left to navigate a complex and changing legal landscape with little information or support, all while bearing the consequences of state and employer inaction. In this system, irregularization is not a risk – it is a built-in feature, reinforcing a labor market that thrives on low-cost, compliant, and easily replaceable workers.

Disposable Labor and Racialized Policing

The exploitation of migrant workers cannot be separated from the historical and ongoing legacies of racial capitalism. Harold Wolpe's (1972) foundational analysis of racial capitalism under apartheid in South Africa argued that the apartheid system was not just a reflection of racist ideology but also a core element of capitalist accumulation. In this way, capitalism has long relied on racialized hierarchies to justify the super-exploitation of specific laboring populations. He showed that the South African economy relied on the racialized segmentation of the labor force – populations that are systemically marked as disposable, cheap, and exploitable – whose labor is extracted without proper recognition, protection, or compensation. In today's context, this includes migrant workers who are structurally excluded from full political and social membership, denied rights and access to services, and confined to precarious, low-paid sectors. Their exploitation mirrors the logic of apartheid: they are essential yet excluded, visible as laboring bodies but invisible as rights-bearing subjects. Similarly, Quijano (2000) argues that the global organization of labor along racial and geopolitical lines is not an accidental feature of capitalism but a constitutive one, rooted

in the coloniality of power that continues to mark some populations as inherently governable, exploitable, and excluded from full social and political membership.

Today, this logic operates in the EU through flexible labor regimes that devalue the lives of racialized workers while maximizing their economic output.

In Croatia and other peripheral countries, this is evident in how migrant workers are both essential to economic growth and simultaneously seen as disposable subjects. With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, many migrant workers lost their jobs overnight, with no access to unemployment benefits or housing support. Others were forced to continue working in high-risk environments – especially in logistics, agriculture, and elder care – with no adequate health protections, bearing the brunt of the pandemic's health and economic challenges.

Moreover, racialization affects not only labor conditions but also social life. Migrants face xenoracism, racial profiling, and surveillance, along with racialized policing of South Asian and Middle Eastern workers, including frequent ID checks and detention of those who have fallen into irregularized status (Bužinkić, 2025; Public Ombudsman, 2025).

Separation, Alienation, and Barriers to Integration

The racialized treatment of migrant workers also shows through barriers to family reunification, limited access to language learning, and educational exclusion. These policies foster a mindset that treats migrant workers as temporary, disposable, and less deserving of social rights. In Croatia, as in much of Central and Eastern Europe, the state provides little to no institutional support for migrants to access public services in languages they understand or attend Croatian language learning classes. According to the Public Ombudsman (2025), in 2024, only 104 migrant workers participated in Croatian language courses through state-issued learning vouchers: 36 from Nepal, 29 from the Philippines, 21 from Sri Lanka, eight from Ukraine, four from Bang-

ladesh, three from India, and one each from China, Kosovo, and Kyrgyzstan (HZZ, 2024). The lack of systemic support creates a climate of isolation and psychological distress, known as “minority stress” (Tadić, 2025), which further compounds the already exploitative conditions in their workplaces.

The denial of the right to family life, although enshrined in international human rights law, has become normalized in policy frameworks. Migrant workers are often told to leave their families behind because their stay is only “temporary,” even though many spend years moving between exploitative contracts without the possibility of settlement. This legal and social alienation reinforces the rationale of instrumentalized migration, with workers viewed solely in terms of their utility for the labor market.

The Role of the State: Securitization and Neoliberal Governance

State institutions in Europe, particularly in the EU periphery, play a dual and contradictory role in managing labor migration. On the one hand, they facilitate the influx of migrant workers to address labor shortages, especially in construction, tourism, delivery, agriculture, and care sectors. On the other hand, these same institutions enforce restrictive policies that keep migrant workers in legally insecure and socially marginalized positions. In practice, this means that while employers are given significant freedom to recruit and manage migrant labor, state bodies often fail to ensure adequate protection of workers’ rights and working conditions.

This contradiction is particularly visible in Croatia and other EU peripheries. Border authorities are tasked with both preventing irregular migration, particularly along the Bosnian-Croatian border, and regulating legal labor migration through complex and rigid permit systems. These dual responsibilities create a migration regime that treats the same individuals as both economic resources and potential security threats (Bigo, 2002; Hess & Kasperek, 2017). Contemporary practices that intertwine labor migration with racialized border enforcement have led to the

criminalization, surveillance, and dehumanization of migrant workers, particularly those from the Global South (Fanon, 1963; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013; Tazzioli, 2020). These approaches view migrants more as threats than as vital contributors to national economies. In other words, these regimes treat migrants not as rights-bearing subjects or members of society, but as disposable labor and securitized bodies, reinforcing racial hierarchies and systemic discrimination (Anderson, 2013; Gilmore, 2007).

This fragmented approach not only increases administrative burdens on workers but also fuels a system where exploitation, legal precarity, and racialized surveillance can persist with limited accountability. To ensure fairer outcomes, labor migration governance must shift toward protecting workers' rights, improving transparency, and holding employers and recruitment agencies accountable. Beyond the direct harm inflicted on migrant workers, this securitized approach to migration governance has broader consequences for host communities. By maintaining migrants in a state of legal and social precarity, these policies inhibit meaningful integration, social cohesion, and mutual investment in the community (de Genova, 2010). They undermine the common good by fostering fear, division, and resentment rather than solidarity and shared well-being. From a policy and advocacy standpoint, the failure to ensure stable legal status, family unity, and access to rights not only violates international human rights principles but also erodes the long-term benefits of migration for society as a whole, including labor market stability, intercultural exchange, and community resilience.

Agency and the Politics of Organizing

Despite these structural constraints, migrant workers across Europe are organizing – often under the radar – to demand rights, recognition, and justice. Throughout Europe, and increasingly in Croatia, migrant workers are taking action to resist exploitation and assert their rights, often without formal union backing. In response to unpaid wages, unsafe working conditions, or permit manipulation, workers from South Asia and Af-

rica have organized walkouts, protests, and strikes, pursued legal complaints, and formed support networks, frequently relying on grassroots initiatives or informal means such as WhatsApp groups or shared living spaces. These actions challenge the perception of migrant workers as passive or voiceless and show that, even in highly precarious conditions, workers are actively demanding accountability.

However, migrant organizing efforts still go largely under-recognized and under-supported by mainstream institutions. Trade unions have been slow to include migrant workers in their advocacy, and state institutions have largely failed to create accessible mechanisms for migrants to report abuse or organize without fear of retaliation. Where support has emerged – through grassroots organizations, legal aid groups, or alliances with local workers – it has demonstrated the potential to improve working conditions, push back against employer impunity, and foster more inclusive labor rights frameworks.

Recommendations: Toward Justice-Based Labor Regimes

The racialized treatment of migrant workers in Europe over the past decade reveals deep structural inequalities rooted in colonial histories, neoliberal capitalism, and border violence. From legal precarity to exploitative labor practices, migrants in the EU peripheries face multiple forms of domination that devalue their lives and labor. Yet, even within these systems of oppression, migrant workers continue to organize, resist, and imagine alternative futures.

To move beyond this state, it is crucial that policies address not only the economic dimensions of migrant labor but also the racialized logics that underpin current governance models. This includes the following steps:

1) Guarantee equal labor protection and workplace safety for all workers, regardless of nationality or legal status.

All workers, including undocumented and migrant workers, must be protected by the same labor standards and en-

forcement mechanisms. This requires binding obligations for employers to ensure safe working conditions, dignified and non-segregated housing, living wages, and unrestricted access to health care. Policy must shift away from treating migrant labor as a temporary or expendable resource and instead prioritize workers' dignity, autonomy, and rights to livelihood and community.

The policy should also focus on establishing and expanding proactive labor inspection mechanisms for high-risk sectors that employ migrant workers (e.g., construction, hospitality, logistics), with regular, unannounced workplace visits and the ability to impose sanctions on employers violating labor law. The inspections should be carried out through community-accountable and worker-informed models, rather than solely through state apparatuses. Enforcement should focus on restorative remedies and employer accountability, not deportations or worker surveillance.

Furthermore, all employment and recruitment agencies must be subject to binding transparency requirements on wages, housing, and contracts, with information provided in languages that workers understand. This transparency must be guaranteed at the point of recruitment and throughout the employment relationship. A publicly accessible registry of agencies and employers – linked to performance metrics on labor rights compliance – should be developed and co-governed by labor unions, migrant associations, and civil society, rather than solely by state actors.

2) Create secure, transparent, and non-discriminatory legal pathways for residency and family reunification.

This includes reforming the work permit regime to ensure automatic or fast-tracked renewal processes that are not solely dependent on employer initiative. It also involves extending the grace period to protect migrants from falling into irregular status due to employer noncompliance or administrative delays. The state must provide clear, multilingual informa-

tion on legal rights and permit procedures, as well as fund independent legal aid services to support migrants navigating these bureaucratic systems.

Family reunification should be recognized as a fundamental right and integrated into labor migration policies, ensuring that migrant workers are not forced to endure prolonged separation from their loved ones while contributing to the host country's economy.

3) Prioritize anti-racism and combat racialized policing

Countries should adopt national anti-discrimination and anti-racism strategies to explicitly address racial profiling and targeted policing of migrants in public spaces and workplaces. This includes training police and labor inspectors on racial bias, creating oversight mechanisms to monitor racialized enforcement practices, and enabling migrant communities to report abuses without fear of detention or deportation. Protecting migrants must be prioritized in emergency responses to pandemics or economic crises, with guaranteed access to social protection, health care, and safe housing.

4) Invest in long-term integration infrastructure that includes language education, housing, and accessibility of public services.

The policy must focus on recognizing the permanent nature of labor migration and support it with policies that promote social cohesion and equal participation. This involves introducing integration measures into labor migration policy from the outset, including guaranteed access to free and accessible language learning, translation services in public institutions, and family reunification pathways. Migration should not be treated as temporary when labor needs are structural in nature. States should recognize migrant workers' social and family lives as integral to their long-term social inclusion and well-being, rather than treating them solely as labor inputs.

5) End Racialized and Punitive Border Enforcement in Labor Migration Governance

Labor migration must be governed by a framework grounded in rights, dignity, and accountability, rather than on security and control. To reverse this, states must dismantle punitive migration regimes that prioritize control over protection. Labor migration governance should be entirely separated from security and policing mandates and assigned to independent institutions responsible for safeguarding labor rights, regulating recruitment practices, and ensuring the well-being of migrants. This includes expanding the role of labor ministries, social welfare institutions, and equality bodies, while limiting the involvement of border police in matters of legal migration and employment.

Coordination among labor, social affairs, and interior ministries must be restructured to place migrant rights and protections at the center. Migration frameworks should be designed to reduce bureaucratic barriers, ensure procedural fairness, and recognize migrants as rights-holders entitled to safe working conditions, legal security, and protection from racialized violence. This shift is not simply administrative – it is a crucial step toward dismantling institutionalized racism and building a just migration governance system.

6) Recognize and support the organizing and collective agency of migrant workers.

It is crucial to invest in multilingual organizing platforms, provide legal protection for labor organizers, and include migrant representatives in tripartite labor dialogues.

The state must provide institutional and financial support for migrant-led associations, legal aid organizations, and community centers that facilitate collective organizing and rights education. Trade unions should be required – and supported through training and outreach resources – to include migrant workers in their representation structures and collective bar-



gaining processes. Governments should protect the rights of migrant workers to organize by protecting them against employer retaliation and ensuring access to legal remedies for labor rights violations.

The policy must also attend to improving legal protections for migrant whistleblowers, supporting multilingual and culturally competent outreach, and encouraging unions to extend full representation to migrant workers. Investing in these areas not only ensures better protection for vulnerable laborers but also contributes to more democratic and equitable labor relations overall.

Ultimately, building justice-based economies in Europe requires centering the demands, knowledge, and struggles of migrant workers. Their collective resistance offers not only a critique of the present but also a horizon of transformation – one grounded in dignity, solidarity, and racial justice.

