Alvarado *et al. Comparative Migration Studies* (2025) 13:60
https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-025-00483-7

Comparative Migration Studies

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Open Access

Business migration between labour and trade: evidence from Switzerland

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Abstract
Largely unnoticed by the migration literature, business migration has established itself as a form of labour migration that is substantial in terms of numbers and receives preferential treatment in international and national migration law. Intra-corporate transferees, contractual service suppliers and business visitors all fall within this category and benefit from facilitated admission procedures agreed under trade agreements and corresponding provisions in national legislation. Assigned for temporary stays and retaining their work contract in the home country, these business migrants represent a "market model" of migration policy exploiting the economic benefits of human movement while avoiding migrants' integration into the host countries' labour market and society. This article conceptualizes business migration at the nexus of trade law, international labour markets and migration research and uses a mix of legal analysis, population register and other statistical data as well as survey data from Switzerland to demonstrate the scale and importance of this under-investigated yet significant type of economic migration. Amounting to nearly half of the regulated labour immigration into Switzerland, business migration is strongly associated with trade and investment ties as well as the presence of multinational companies. In contrast, trade agreements facilitating this type of labour mobility have no systematic effect.

Keywords Business migration, Labour migration, Mobility, Immigration policy, Intra-corporate transfers, Contractual service suppliers, Trade, Multinational companies, Switzerland

Introduction

States' prerogative to control immigration is usually said to be one of the last bastions of their sovereignty (Dauvergne, 2004, 2014). Yet globalisation and the integration of national labour markets have not stopped at immigration policy. The restructuring of the world economy towards knowledge-intensive, service-based and transnationalised modes of economic activity has spurred the liberalisation of the types of labour that serves economic demands and the introduction of new channels for attracting 'desired' migrants. The development of targeted migration policy reforms by advanced economies seeking to attract highly skilled migrants in a global 'race for talent' is by now well documented in migration scholarship (Cerna, 2016; Cerna & Czaika, 2016; Chambers et al., 1998; Chiswick, 2011; Shachar, 2006; Weinar and Klekowski von Koppenfels 2020). However, the intersection between the global integration of markets, international trade law, and the liberalisation of economic migration does not feature prominently in scholarly literature, where these build largely separate strands (Al Ariss & Crowley-Henry, 2013; Tans, 2017a).

In this article, we seek to bridge these perspectives by calling attention to a specific type of labour migration, which we call business migration, that lies at the crossroads of migration policy, international trade law, and global markets. In doing this, we rejoin the agenda set out by Brettell and Hollifield (2022) on migration theory as a cross-disciplinary field. Business migration lies between labour and trade because it refers to a specific type of temporary labour mobility that has been liberalised as part of trade in services in the World Trade Organization (WTO) and bilateral trade agreements. This liberalisation agenda is innately linked to the spread of multinational companies and the integration of labour markets in the global knowledge economy. Business migrants are high-skilled workers moving for temporary assignments linked to the delivery of a commercial service while retaining their work contract with their employer in their home country. The transnational activity of firms is its main driver: workers move as a corollary, often without counting as foreign labour or immigration. This phenomenon is important not only because it is distinct from other —better studied— forms of migration, but also because it has the potential to generate and increase inequalities between migrants as well as between locals and migrants (Herzfeld Olsson, 2019; McGovern, 2012; Verschueren, 2021). Moreover, despite accounting for a large portion of regulated migration in some advanced economies (Salt & Brewster, 2023) it has been largely neglected in the migration policy scholarship. So far, its study has been mostly confined to the human resource management literature, where it is described as “international assignments” “business mobility” or “(self-initiated) expatriation” (Al Ariss & Crowley-Henry, 2013; Antoons et al., 2018a; Guo et al., 2018; Jones, 2013). While a burgeoning critical literature in migration studies engages with the study of “expats” and the role of categorisations in migration (Beck, 2023; Cosquer, 2023; Cranston, 2017; Piccoli et al. 2024) and high-skilled and intra-corporate economic migration more generally (Findlay et al., 1996; Peixoto, 2001), explicit engagement with the role of politics and the policies regulating business mobility remain rare (Hoffmeyer-Zlotnik, 2024a).

This article helps fill this gap through a twofold contribution. First, we add to the migration policy literature by conceptualising business migration as an important form of international mobility that stems from transnational economic integration and escapes the traditional understanding of labour migration. Second, we illustrate its importance through the case of Switzerland, a highly globalised country with an otherwise restrictive immigration regime. We use (i) legal analysis to describe how business migration fits into existing regulatory frameworks; (ii) micro-level register and survey data to describe the scope and key characteristics of business migrants in the 2015 to 2021 period; and (iii) macro-level cross-country and regional data to explore the main correlates of business migration. We thus investigate its interplay with trade and investment flows, the presence of multinational corporations [MNCs], and corresponding commitments in Preferential Trade Agreements [PTAs]. As such, we expand upon the nascent body of empirical literature on the politics of posted and intra-corporate mobility (Lens et al., 2022; Salt & Brewster, 2022).

Conceptualising business migration

The specificities of business migration as a distinct phenomenon emerge when crossing perspectives from migration research with those of trade law and international labour markets. As pointed out by Brettell and Hollifield (2022), such bridging of different disciplinary perspectives allows recognizing broader patterns beyond one's "narrow field of inquiry" (idem 2023:4) and developing deeper conceptual understandings. After briefly introducing the term of business migration, we retrace these specificities of this type of international migration in its regulatory framework, underlying labour relations, and its connection to global markets including trade, foreign direct investment and multinational corporations.

What is business migration?

Business migration consists of high-skilled workers who are posted by their employer to work in another country for a certain period while retaining their work contract at home, and thus not formally entering the host country's labour market. We use the term to stress that this form of migration is driven primarily by firms' activities, rather than state regulations or workers' aspirations. In migration studies, the term 'business migration' has not been used consistently. Studies that engage with transnational business activities tend to focus on migrant entrepreneurship (De Lange, 2018; Sinkovics & Reuber, 2021) or investor migration programmes (Sumption, 2025), and hence on migrants' independent business activity rather than on migrant's role as employees in transnational business. The management and human resources literature, on the other hand, uses a variety of terms for such forms of migration including "business expatriation" (McNulty & Brewster, 2017), "global talent" (Caligiuri et al., 2024), or, occasionally, (skilled) (im) migrants (Crowley-Henry et al., 2018). In this article, we propose a more specific and systematic use of the term, rooted in international trade law and transnational corporate mobility. Following common definitions in trade and immigration law, we differentiate between different categories of business migrants including business visitors [BVs] who may enter on short-term visas to set up a business and are allowed to stay for a duration usually not exceeding a few months, contractual service suppliers [CSSs] who move in the context of a firm delivering a service in another country for a limited time period and intra-company transferees [ICTs] moving between the branches of MNCs for extended periods of often several years.[1] The online appendix contains a more detailed glossary of these categories.

Key features

Business migration has thus far been discussed mainly in management and human resources research and, to some degree, in the legal literature (Crowley-Henry et al., 2018; Jones, 2013; Tans, 2017a; Westman et al., 2023). Despite the fact that the study of international migration has undergone a 'mobility turn' (Sheller & Urry, 2006) and has started to engage more with temporary and privileged forms of mobility (Cranston, 2017; Kunz, 2016; Triandafyllidou, 2022), the specific nature of business migration and its numerical importance have not received systematic attention.

[1] Business migrants have different labels in governance practice and can also entail migrants described as 'investors' or 'business sellers'. Common descriptions of business mobilities also include independent professionals, who are left out of the analysis here as we focus on employed workers.

We argue that a thorough conceptualisation of business migration from a migration policy perspective and an investigation of its regulation, characteristics and correlates are needed because business migration follows a different rationale from regular labour migration in at least three respects. First, the *regulatory framework* that governs business migration is highly internationalised, as it is shaped by commitments in multi- and bilateral trade arrangements. These rules are often technical in nature — embedded in executive regulations, trade agreement schedules, or administrative guidelines — and they remain opaque in practice, as they are rarely subject to public debate and are poorly captured in migration statistics. Governed through trade law and executive-level regulation, business migration often avoids politicisation and public debate, rendering it a blind spot in both scholarly and policy discourse (Lavenex et al., 2025). Second, business migrants are generally viewed as highly skilled and privileged (Cranston, 2017). Their status as immigrant however hinges on the transnational activity of the employing firm and minimises economic and social rights, such as the right to change employer or to extend the stay in the host country, mirroring the market model logic of immigration policy (Boucher & Gest, 2018). Third, the drivers of business migration are tied to the needs of multinational companies, international business and investment, rather than general labour demand.

In contrast to regular labour migration, the rules for business migration are thus strongly influenced by trade and investment rationales laid down in international law. A key legal foundation for business migration lies in the General Agreement on Trade in Services [GATS], concluded under the auspices of the World Trade Organization [WTO]. The GATS facilitates business migration by removing or easing barriers to economic mobility such as economic needs tests, quota restrictions or qualification requirements. With the stalling of multilateral trade liberalisation, relevant provisions have also flourished in regional integration frameworks (e.g. in the European Union (EU/EFTA), the Association of South East Asian States or the US-Mexico-Canada Agreement) and, increasingly, in bilateral PTAs (Lavenex et al., 2023b; Panizzon & Singh, 2020). These agreements frame business migration in particularly technical terms and refer to it as "mode 4" of delivering services across national borders.[2] As a result, the way business migration is governed and discussed is highly technical in nature. National provisions for business migrants are often formulated as exemptions to general immigration law or regulated at the level of administrative law (de Lange et al., 2021), and very little research exists on how exactly the international norms are implemented into national law (Schlegel & Sieber-Gasser, 2014; Tans, 2017b). Likely due to these opaque regulations, business migration is harder to detect in official data than other forms of labour migration. National immigration statistics in many countries, including heavy-weights such as Australia, Canada or Germany, do not single it out from other economic migrants or allow business migrants to obtain both category-specific and more general work and residence permits. In consequence, we often lack reliable data sources that would allow scholars and policy-makers to identify business migrants in national statistics (Albien and Ruedin 2023; ILO, 2022).[3] Data collection on business migration is further impeded by the

[2] Trade law refers to four "modes" of trading services across borders: electronic trade (mode 1), customer mobility (mode 2), the mobility of a juridical person or foreign direct investment (mode 3), and the mobility of the service provider (mode 4) (World Trade Organization 1995).

[3] A notable exception is the European Union, where the creation of an EU-wide residence permit for ICTs has also resulted in a dedicated statistical category for this type of business migration (Eurostat 2022).

short-term nature of many business assignments, which often occur visa-free or on the basis of business visas (Weinar and Klekowski von Koppenfels 2020: 85).

The characteristics of business migrants and their specific employment situation also differ from regular forms of labour migration in both high- and low-skilled jobs. The core features of business migration squarely fit some of the characteristics of the so-called "*market model*" of immigration policy: temporary labour migration policies that are geared at reaping the economic benefits of foreign labour while avoiding migrants' settlement in the host society (Boucher & Gest, 2018; Dauvergne & Marsden, 2014a, b). Business migration thus extends the features of the market model to highly-skilled and comparatively well-paid professionals —a group that is frequently assumed to be privileged and to have easy access to long-term resident status (Favell et al., 2006; Shachar & Hirschl, 2013). Compared to migrant workers coming for low-skilled jobs, based on temporary contracts most often with small and medium size companies in domestically oriented industries like agriculture and hospitality, business migrants' stay abroad is typically part of a longer working contract in export-oriented, large and internationally competitive firms (Kolb et al., 2004; Salt & Brewster, 2023). However, while business migration is always discussed as a form of temporary migration, ICT assignments can last for several years, and may eventually lead to a more permanent immigration status based on regular employment (Hoffmeyer-Zlotnik, 2024b). A key difference between business migration and traditional labour migration is hence not that business migrants have different aspirations or do different kinds of work, but in business migrants' distinct legal status. By remaining outside the domestic labour market, they are often placed in a position of heightened dependence on their employers — despite occupying mostly highly skilled and comparatively well-paid jobs.

A final distinctive feature is the key role *global markets* play in shaping business migration flows. In contrast to other temporary labour migrants and guest workers, which are typically hired via recruitment agencies and state-to-state bilateral labour agreements (Peters, 2019), the deployment of business migrants is decided within multinational companies or as part of a cross-border service contract. Hence, business migration is linked to the labour demands created by the shift to a global service- and knowledge-based economy and the growth in foreign direct investment [FDI]. The link between economic transformation, trade integration and human mobility is particularly salient in the service sector, where the delivery of a service - despite the growing prevalence of remote work - often presupposes the physical presence of the service provider (Chaudhuri et al., 2004; Walmsley & Winters, 2005). Services have been the fastest growing sector over the last decades, accounting for increasing portions of global employment and trade, particularly in Western countries (Hufbauer & Stephenson, 2007).

Understanding business migration

In this section, we explore the conditions which enable business migration to play a significant role in a country's economy and immigration policy. We start by reviewing the literature on why firms use business migration as part of their human resource strategy before proposing macro-economic and political variables that we expect to be associated with business migration flows between countries. In section VI, we present a first empirical test of their relevance.

Because business migration has primarily been studied from a management perspective, its drivers have thus far been located chiefly at the firm level. The rise of business migration is thus attributed to the growth in knowledge-intensive industries, such as finance or telecommunication, where MNCs have a strong presence. In these industries, the mobility of professionals across subsidiaries and countries is "a key resource that firms rely on to differentiate their operations from that of their competitors" (Guo et al., 2018: 1). Indeed, the transferability of skills and specialised, tacit knowledge or 'talent' within multinational firms' global networks is seen as a key comparative advantage for innovation, creativity and growth. This has spurred the emergence of "transnational corporate elites" operating on a global labour market (Beaverstock, 2018), whose mobility has become pivotal to the competitiveness of international firms (Kerr et al., 2017). In their analysis of ICT migration in the UK, Salt and Brewster (2022) find that MNCs move ICTs for three main reasons: "gap filling" or bringing in new skills to a country; "coordination and control" within MNCs to ensure that subsidiaries follow the line of the company; and staff attraction, development and retention (see also KPMG, 2023). But in addition to ICTs assigned usually for managerial positions of several years, MNCs today function through "a myriad of mobilities, including 'traditional' expatriation, short-term assignments and business travel" (Beaverstock, 2018: 503). This development is partly a reaction to the considerable costs of longer-term relocations, but also a function of technological innovation, digitalisation, and the general facilitation of travel (Antoons et al., 2018b; Westman et al., 2023). Additionally, an analysis of ICT wages in Sweden and anecdotal evidence from the UK also suggest that business migration may be a way to save labour costs as workers remain subject to their home country work contracts (Herzfeld Olsson, 2019; Palmer 2016). While the expansion of remote work accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic has changed the patterns of mobility and increased the number of short-term assignments, it has not fundamentally altered firms' motives for international assignments (KPMG, 2023). Building on the reasons behind firms' reliance on business migration, and the above discussion, we propose three macro variables that we expect to be associated with the presence of business migration.

Domestic relevance of MNCs. It has long been established in migration policy research that employers play an important role in shaping national migration policies (Afonso, 2014; Freeman, 1995; Peters, 2017). Salt and Brewster note that large companies have particularly strong ties with governments since all their strategic decisions "require accommodations with governments in the countries in which they operate. Hence, any government's role in managing migration is inexorably intertwined in a symbiotic relationship with the mass of corporate global management of human resources" (2023: 384). For the United Kingdom, they note that immigration policy officials regularly meet with MNCs and run seminars for their staff on the immigration system, implying a synergistic relationship between governments and large MNCs (Salt & Brewster, 2023: 385). We may thus expect that such a facilitation of business migration is more likely in advanced economies with high levels of international integration and strong presence of MNCs, particularly in the sectors that primarily resort to business migration: retail, financial services and technology (KPMG, 2023: 6; Salt & Brewster, 2023: 382). Accordingly, we expect business migrants to be concentrated in regions of destination countries with a higher presence of MNCs.

Trade and investment intensity. Following the rationale that business migration should be more prevalent in countries in which MNCs play a strong role in the economy, trade and investment flows should also be correlated with flows of business migrants. Studies on economies in Europe and Northern America show that trade flows have a positive association with migration flows (Campaniello, 2014; Ghatak et al., 2009; Wagner et al., 2002), and the same is true for FDI (Poot & Strutt, 2010: 1930). This association should be stronger for business migrants than for regular labour migrants, given that the very act of sending a worker depends on the existence of a transnational service contract in the case of CSSs or of a company presence in multiple countries in the case of ICTs. As a result, we expect a higher trade volume and larger FDI flows with a partner country to result in more business migrants from that country.

PTA presence. The recent Migration Provisions in Preferential Trade Agreements (MITA) dataset documents that around 75% of all PTAs concluded between 2010 and 2020 contain provisions facilitating business migration (Lavenex et al., 2023c). These provisions include admission commitments for specific groups such as ICT and CSS and sometimes their family members, and facilitations such as exemptions from admission quotas or labour market tests. PTAs have been shown to increase migration flows in general (Orefice, 2015) and business travel in particular (Mayer et al., 2021). We therefore expect the conclusion of a PTA to be associated with an increase in business migration.

Impact of national immigration rules. Finally, we expect that the general thrust of a country's immigration policy —whether it is more open or closed to migrant labour— will not strongly influence its openness to business migration. While stricter admission rules or documentary requirements generally increase the hurdles for migration, multinational companies and internationally oriented service firms are well equipped to navigate these hurdles and often enjoy a close relationship with local immigration authorities (Sandoz, 2019). Second, business migrants are a relatively unknown group who rarely figure in immigration policy discussions. When they do, the label "migrant" is usually avoided, as the international rules on business migration are usually framed as a highly technical matter pertaining to economic, not migration policy (Hoffmeyer-Zlotnik, 2024b). A recent example is the PTA concluded between the United Kingdom and India in the spring of 2025. The PTA includes both admission commitments for business migrants and exempts Indian workers from social security contributions in the UK for three years. In presenting the agreement, a British government official stated: "It only covers business mobility, which is different from immigration, as it is about travel for specific and temporary business purposes" (Business Standard 2025).

The Swiss case

To study business migration empirically, we turn to Switzerland, a hyper-globalised economy that is service-oriented, knowledge-based and has a high demand for foreign labour while simultaneously facing high levels of politicisation of migration. According to the KOF[4] Globalization Index of 2019, Switzerland was the most globalised country in the world in that year. Switzerland has a highly export-oriented economy, with exports making up 40% of the country's gross domestic product [GDP] and services constituting

[4] KOF stands for "Konjunkturforschungsstelle" (see https://kof.ethz.ch/en/the-institute/our-history.html).

the biggest part of both exports and outward-oriented FDI. This global integration also plays out within Switzerland: in 2022, the country registered 37,877 firms that were part of a multinational company, employing around 1.5 million persons —about one quarter of total employment. Foreign MNCs alone employ almost one million persons.[5] The largest MNCs in terms of employees in Switzerland operate in the manufacturing (especially pharmaceuticals and machinery), wholesale trade and financial activities and insurance sectors (in that order).[6] They include prominent companies such as Nestlé, Roche, Glencore and UBS. Moreover, both turnover and revenue are concentrated in a small number of MNCs: the 1% of MNCs with at least 1,000 employees is responsible for 56% of gross value added.[7] Indeed, 96% of MNCs in Switzerland have less than 250 employees. Unfortunately, Swiss labour market data does not provide specific statistics on 'business migrants' within MNCs.

Switzerland has also included admission commitments for business migration in many of its trade agreements: 20 out of the 53 agreements it has signed contain such facilitations, including all those concluded since 2014 (Lavenex et al., 2023a).

To the extent that Switzerland combines significant MNC presence and an export-oriented economy with a strong demand for high-skilled workers in the service of international companies, the country can be conceived of as a most likely case for the facilitation of business migration from an economic perspective. At the same time, the high level of politicisation of immigration has resulted in a restrictive regulatory environment for labour immigration, with strict quotas for non-EU labour migrants and a limitation of admission to highly-skilled migrants (Hercog & Sandoz, 2018; Lavenex 2023: 202). This makes Switzerland an ideal case to explore both the relation between trade, investment and business migrant flows as well as the role of immigration regimes in shaping these flows.

Moreover, Swiss immigration statistics allow for more precise analyses of business migration than the statistics of many other European countries as they differentiate between entries and permits issued for local employment and permits for persons working in Switzerland but employed abroad starting in 2015. The Swiss case thus allows us to identify business migration and quantify its importance and specificities as a form of mobility that has long existed but remains largely invisible and underexamined in mainstream migration research focused on more conventional labour migration.

Data and method

To study business migration in Switzerland, we rely on population register data, visa statistics, a migrant survey and various public statistics.[8] To identify business migrants we use the Swiss Population and Household Statistics (STATPOP) providing annual data for both movements and stocks. Since the year 2015, the stocks data (which registers the population present in the country at the end of each calendar year and the residence

[5] Swiss Federal Statistical Office (BFS). Enterprise Group Statistics (STAGRE). Accessed July 1 st, 2025. https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/en/home/statistics/industry-services/stagre.html.

[6] Together, MNCs in the manufacturing and trade sectors "account for 718,000 jobs and generate turnover of CHF 1,545 billion, representing more than half of total employment and more than 80% of the total turnover of all multinationals in Switzerland." (Swiss Federal Statistical Office, Press Release 25.11.2022). Accessed July 1 st, 2025. https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/fr/home/statistiques/industrie-services/stagre.assetdetail.23749808.html.

[7] Swiss Federal Statistical Office, "Portrait des groupes d'entreprises en Suisse de 2014 à 2023" (November 2024). Accessed July 1 st, 2025. https://www.bfs.admin.ch/asset/en/33046079.

[8] See the online appendix for a full list of data sources.

status of all present immigrants) contains separate categories for immigrants who retain their work contract in their home country, referred to as posted workers. We thus identify business migrants by aggregating the eight permission codes used for posted workers and calculate their relative importance within the group of migrants subject to the most restrictive immigration regime: third-country (non-EU/EFTA) migrants.[9] [10] Note that register data allows us to identify business migrants but does not differentiate between ICTs or CSSs. Moreover, ICTs may also work in Switzerland with a local employment contract if the employing MNC hires them locally for the duration of their assignment.[11] Hence, the figures on posted workers likely underrepresent the phenomenon of business migration in Switzerland. Moreover, while register data is likely to include ICTs and CSSs coming for more than four months, it does not include business migrants coming to do paid work for short periods of time, such as BVs or some CSSs. To address this limitation, we use data from the Swiss State Secretariat for Migration (SEM) on short-term Schengen visas. Based on type C visas, which are required for foreigners staying up to 90 days (within a period of 180 days) and are granted for different purposes, we construct a panel with the annual number of C visas issued for business purposes, by place of issue, for the period 2011–2019.[12]

Finally, we also draw on the Migration Mobility Survey (Wanner et al. 2025) to gain more detailed insight into the characteristics, work and living conditions of business migrants. The survey is conducted in biennial waves since 2016 on a population of roughly 7000 adult persons born abroad and with foreign citizenship who have moved to Switzerland in the last ten years.[13]

The analysis starts by describing the regulatory framework for business migration in Switzerland, focusing specifically on whether the overall restrictiveness of Swiss immigration rules hinder business migration. We then present descriptive insights on the nature and volume of business migration in Switzerland and on individual characteristics of ICTs. The third section explores the correlates of business migration using ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions and a staggered difference-in-differences model to explore whether signing a PTA is associated with increases in posted worker flows. We interpret these results as indicative of interlinkages rather than unidirectional causality, given the likely mutual reinforcement between business migration, macroeconomic variables, and the regulatory frameworks governing trade and migration. These factors are not exogenous to one another, and should be understood as co-evolving within broader political and economic dynamics.

[9] See the Online Appendix for detailed coding. It is worth noting that since the permission code information used to identify business migrants is only available in the stocks data, individuals who arrive and leave within a single year are not included in our dataset comparing posted to non-posted workers. If anything, we expect this to cause an undercounting of business migrants relative to regular labour migrants who tend to have longer stays.

[10] While EU/EFTA ICTs and CSSs working in Switzerland for a foreign employer may appear functionally similar to third-country posted workers, their legal and labour market position is ultimately different due to their rights under the free movement agreement. Thus, even if EU/EFTA posted workers are subject to certain requirements (such as notification obligations), they still benefit from a comparatively privileged legal status compared to third-country nationals. While no official statistics on posted workers from EU/EFTA countries are available, in our data we find that between 2015 and 2019 there were approximately 12,000 posted workers in Switzerland who were EU/EFTA nationals and had been posted by companies located in the EU/EFTA.

[11] For an overview of assignment practices see for example KPMG (2023: 9).

[12] Countries with rights of free movement are excluded, as well as those with visa-free travel agreements from the year the agreement enters into force. The data also excludes country-years in which less than 5 visas were granted to preserve anonymity. Finally, we also excluded countries that have less than 4 years of data in the series.

[13] See https://nccr-onthemove.ch/research/migration-mobility-survey/ for more information on the survey.

Findings

Regulating business migration in Switzerland

The regulatory context that facilitates business migration spans the national, regional and international level and goes beyond traditional immigration channels. However, analyses of domestic implementation of international commitments are still scarce and focused on questions of compliance with international law (de Lange et al., 2021; Tans, 2017a). As a result, we do not know much about how national migration policies incorporate these rules and to what extent they lead to a situation where business migrants enjoy advantages or disadvantages compared to regular labour migrants. Here we conduct a first in-depth analysis of the Swiss case.

Switzerland has a dual immigration system where EU and EFTA citizens benefit from a free movement regime which allows immigration and settlement, including for work purposes, without additional regulation.[14] On the other hand, workers from non-EU/EFTA countries need to go through a comparatively restrictive procedure in order to obtain a work and residence permit.[15] This European privilege in the Swiss immigration system contrasts with the global orientation of its economy and limits firms' opportunities to hire professionals from further abroad. It thus seems to stand in opposition to Switzerland's economic demand for business mobility (Hercog & Sandoz, 2018; Nguyen, 2010). As we will see however, Switzerland's regulatory context benefits business migrants in multiple ways.

Four features make the Swiss labour immigration regime for third country (i.e., non-EU/EFTA) nationals comparatively restrictive. First, it limits admission to managers, specialists and other qualified workers (Art. 23 of the Foreign Nationals and Integration Act (FNIA) adopted in 2005). Second, it is a demand-led model, meaning that a potential migrant must secure a work contract before applying for a permit. Third, employees are in principle only admitted when no Swiss or EU candidate could be found to take up the respective employment (the so-called priority rule; Art. 18 and 21 FNIA). And fourth, a quota system for non-EU/EFTA nationals limits the number of first residence permits issued per year.

As a result of these restrictive features, business migration is regulated through exemptions in immigration rules based on bilateral and multilateral trade agreements and commitments inscribed in the GATS. Switzerland's mode 4 commitments under this framework entail exemptions from labour market tests and the general admission conditions (SEM, 2020: 4.8.1.1) for ICTs, CSSs as well as for BVs (WTO, 2003). Under the Swiss GATS schedule, ICTs employed by firms in other WTO member states as managers, executives or specialists can be admitted for a duration of up to three years, which can be extended to four years. BVs and CSSs are allowed to stay for up to three months. In some PTAs concluded bilaterally or through EFTA agreements, Switzerland grants further limited concessions in terms of length of stay and quotas.[16]

[14] An exception is the mobility of posted workers and self-employed individuals in the framework of service provision, where fears of social dumping have motivated protective measures such as notification requirements.

[15] The only exception are persons from visa-excepted countries staying for less than three months in Switzerland and who do not work for more than eight days during their stay.

[16] The length of stay is extended for ICTs to five years in the bilateral agreements with China and Japan, for example, where the list of sectors in which CSS are allowed is also expanded. See Figure A1 in the Appendix for an overview of the presence of mobility provisions in Switzerland's PTAs.

Business migrants hence benefit in multiple —if sometimes indirect— ways from exceptions from the otherwise restrictive rules. To start with, the wording of "managers and specialists" in the FNIA is reflective of the GATS commitments for ICTs (SEM, 2020: 4.8.1.1), meaning these forms of business mobility considerably shaped the core rules of the Swiss immigration system (Piguet, 2013: 61). Furthermore, ICTs and CSSs are exempted from labour market tests and ICTs are specifically mentioned as a ground for an exception from certain requirements of admission such as a proven prospect of integration into Swiss society and the labour market (Art. 23 FNIA, SEM, 2020, para. 4.8.1.1). Regarding the quota system, the exception for business migrants is more indirect. The quota system defines a maximum number of labour immigrants coming from outside the EU each year (Art. 20 FNIA), which is divided between quotas for cantons and for the Federation. When a canton uses up its permits it can request to make use of the federal quota, which is allocated based on the needs and interests of the economy as a whole (Art. 19 and 20 of the Ordinance on Admission, Residence and Employment (OARE).[17] The Swiss GATS schedule states that GATS commitments do not entail an exception from quotas (WTO, 2003: 4). However, ICTs and the related GATS obligations are specifically mentioned in the government's immigration law guidance as a reason to allocate the federal quota to a canton (SEM, 2020: 4.2.1). Moreover, the PTAs with China, Hong Kong and Japan contain an explicit exemption from any quotas with regard to the persons covered by the commitments, and several other GATS schedules do not include a quota reservation (Schlegel & Sieber-Gasser, 2014). Furthermore, labour migrants who come to work and stay for less than four months —such as CSSs and BVs— are not subject to the quota rules (Art. 19 OARE). Summing up, business migration benefits from numerous exemptions from otherwise restrictive rules, most of which were specifically introduced to facilitate cross-border service provision and transfers within MNCs.

Scope and characteristics of business migration

How are these regulatory facilitations in an overall restrictive environment reflected in the scope and characteristics of business migration in Switzerland? Using STATPOP data, we start by constructing a database recording each stay in Switzerland by adult third-country nationals between 2011 and 2021. The unit of observation is the individual-stay, and for each stay we observe information on the reason for stay resulting in a database of 63,413 different labour migrants with a total of 80,846 stays.[18]

Figure 1 shows that only a relatively small percentage of incoming third-country migrant stays (between 8 and 19% depending on the year) are for work reasons, consistent with Switzerland's restrictive immigration regime beyond EU/EFTA. In absolute terms, the number of third-country immigrant stays for work reasons varies between around 4,000 and almost 8,000 stays, depending on the year (see Figure A2 in the online Appendix).[19]

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[17] Of the 4,000 short-term (L) and 4,500 residence (B) permits authorized in 2023, 2,000 and 1,250 respectively were allocated to the cantons.

[18] When individual characteristics are relevant, we convert our database to the individual level (keeping only one observation per individual for the whole period) and compare workers who were never posted to those that had at least one stay as posted.

[19] In the following, figures included in the online Appendix are always referenced with an A preceding their number.

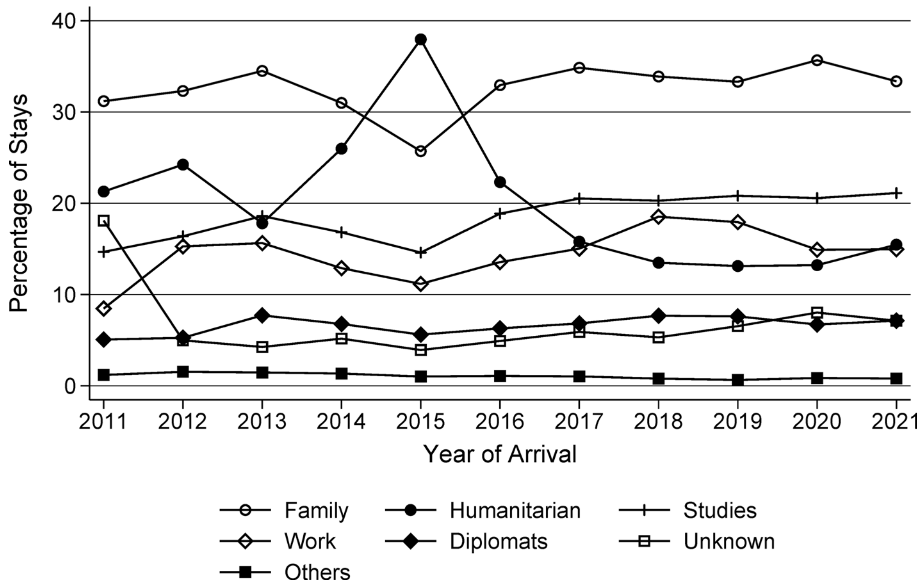

Fig. 1 Third-country immigrant stays by reason for stay, 2011–2021. note: Total number of stays is 482,599. source: STATPOP, see appendix for details

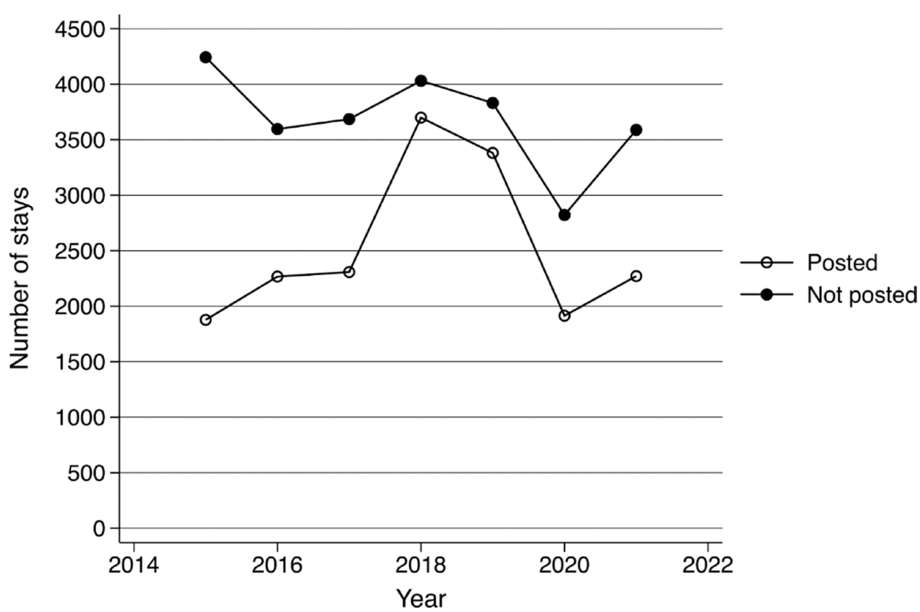

Fig. 2 Annual number of third-country work stays by type in Switzerland. *source: STATPOP, 2015–2021*

Starting in 2015, we can distinguish between work stays made by business migrants (i.e., posted workers in STATPOP) and regular labour migrants (i.e., non-posted workers, or those with a Swiss work contract). As shown in Fig. 2, business migrant stays represent a large and growing proportion of work stays between 2015 and 2019, becoming almost as large as regular labour migrant stays. Indeed, since 2015, posted stays have consistently represented between 31 and 48% of all incoming third-country labour migrant stays (see Figure A3). Overall, 41% of all the work stays between 2015 and 2019 took place as posted workers. Nonetheless, in the early years after the pandemic posted stays seem to be growing more slowly than not posted ones, possibly due to the persistence of travel restrictions and the expansion of remote work.

These percentages are very similar to the volume of ICTs reported by Salt and Brewster (2022) for the UK, where they amounted to between one- and two-thirds of all managed migration in the last three decades. However, while third-country nationals have been found to also account for a substantial part of intra-EU postings in Belgium, we find that the vast majority of postings of third-country nationals to Switzerland are made by non-EU/EFTA companies (Figure A3).

In terms of demographics, posted workers tend to come from a smaller number of countries than regular labour migrants. More than 60% are nationals of either India or the US. On the other hand, less than 25% of those workers who are never posted (i.e., traditional labour migrants) originate from the US or India (see Figure A4 for the share of posted and never-posted workers coming from the top 10 sending countries). India alone represents more than 40% of all posted workers. India's preeminent role as country of origin of posted workers is also evident in the UK, where up to 73% of ICTs in recent years have been posted from India (Salt & Brewster, 2022, p. 385).

To learn more about business migrants' education and personal situation, we use the Migration Mobility Survey. To enhance comparability with our register data, we focus on the subset of respondents coming from non-EU/EFTA countries in the 2016, 2018 and 2020 waves.[20] We identify ICTs —a major component of business mobility— using a question asking respondents whether they came to Switzerland as a transfer within the same company.[21] Comparing ICTs to other third-country foreigners coming to Switzerland with a job offer gives us a sample of 2,229 respondents, 41% of which are ICTs, a figure similar to the overall number of posted workers in the register data.[22] In accordance with the immigration regulations regarding business migrants, the vast majority of ICTs in this sample (89%) report having tertiary education. Furthermore, relative to other non-Europeans moving to Switzerland with a job, ICTs are a privileged type of labour migrant, as shown in Fig. 3: they have a higher income, are more likely to have received support from their employer when moving to Switzerland, are more likely to report that their job uses their skills and knowledge to a high extent and also more likely to have been in full time employment prior to moving to Switzerland. On the other hand, while ICTs are more likely to report high levels of satisfaction with their life in Switzerland, they appear to be less integrated according to the survey data: they are less likely to be fluent in the local language and less likely to be interested in Swiss politics. This corresponds well with the fact that ICTs are also more likely to say their stay in Switzerland is limited in time. However, 41% also say they would like to stay in Switzerland permanently.

[20] The survey has a panel component complemented with refresh samples added in each wave. The analyses presented below pool all third-country respondents from the three waves mentioned in the text (2016, 2018, 2020).

[21] Unfortunately, this question does not allow us to differentiate between those ICTs maintaining their contract in their home country —and thus counted as posted workers in the register data— and those coming with a new, Swiss contract. While there is a question about contract type in the survey, it is only asked in 2020 and responses indicate information levels are low, making it unreliable.

[22] The distribution of countries of origin also roughly confirms what we found in the register data: more than 50% of ICTs come from India and the US alone.

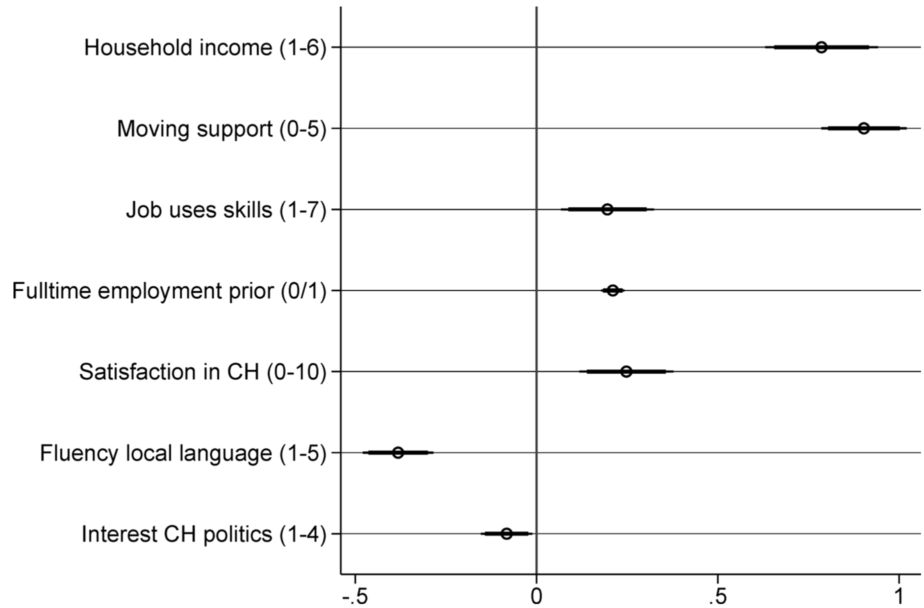

Fig. 3 Comparing ICTs to other third-country labour immigrants. note: Difference-in-means from separate regressions comparing ICTs to other third-country foreigners. Source: Migration Mobility Survey 2016-20

Correlates of business migration

What factors are associated with business migrant flows? In this section, we test our expectations regarding the relationship between business migration and trade and investment flows, the presence of MNCs and preferential trade agreements.

To explore whether trade and investment flows are associated with business migration, we correlate the number of incoming posted workers from each sending country with the value of bilateral trade and Swiss foreign direct investments in that country for the 2015–2019 period. The correlations shown in Fig. 4 are all statistically significant in a regression framework, even after adjusting for partner country's GDP per capita and population size (see Table 1). Panel A shows a strong positive correlation between bilateral trade and posted worker flows.[23] Dashed lines represent linear predictions of the relationship between trade and the volume of posted and not posted workers, respectively. As can be observed, the correlation is significantly stronger for posted workers (see bottom row of Table 1 for statistical tests), highlighting the specificity of business migration for Switzerland's transnationalised modes of production.

Panel B explores the connection between FDI and business migration. Since we focus on non-EU/EFTA countries, there is not enough data to examine the correlation with inward FDI to Switzerland.[24] Nonetheless, investments by Swiss multinationals abroad (outward FDI) are also associated with a greater presence of posted workers coming from those countries, as one would expect if multinational employees move internally from local branches to headquarters. Again, this correlation is positive, statistically significant, and stronger for posted than not posted workers. If we replicate these analyses with visa statistics instead of register data, to check whether these findings also apply to business migrants coming for shorter periods of time, the positive correlation with bilateral trade flows and foreign direct investment is confirmed (see Figures A5 and A6).

[23] These positive correlations are robust to excluding the extreme values of India and the US.

[24] Only data for the US, Canada, Japan and Israel is available for inward FDI to Switzerland.

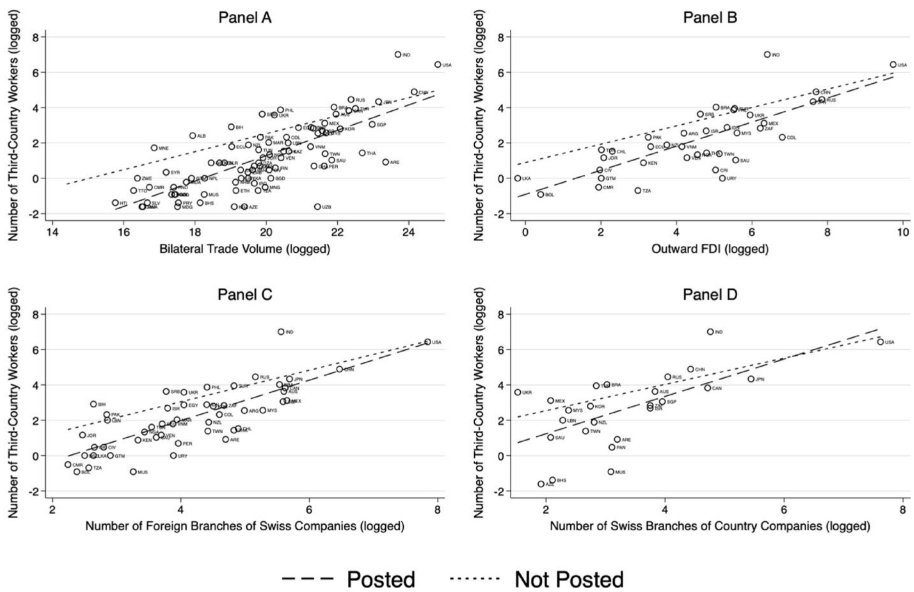

Fig. 4 Trade, FDI, MNCs and posted workers in Switzerland.Note: Scatterplots of number of posted workers from a country and (**A**) bilateral trade volume (total value of exports plus imports in US dollars); (**B**) outward FDI (in US dollars); (**C**) number of branches of companies headquartered in Switzerland in each sending country;(**D**) of number of Swiss branches of companies headquartered in each sending country. Log-transformed mean annual values for 2015-2019. Lines represent linear predictions of relationship between the variable in the x-axis and the number of posted or non-posted third-country workers. See online Appendix for data sources

In terms of the connection between multinational presence and business migrant volumes, we find that the number of branches of Swiss multinationals in foreign countries is correlated with the volume of business migrants in Switzerland originating in those countries (Panel C). The same is true for the equivalent correlation between the number of Swiss branches of foreign multinationals and the volume of posted workers originating in those countries (Panel D). In both cases, we observe a strong positive correlation that is significantly stronger for posted workers. Moreover, these results are robust to using staff numbers rather than number of branches indicating that results are robust to different measures of multinational presence (see Figures A7-A8).[25] Replicating these analyses with visa statistics confirms that the positive correlation with MNCs also applies to business visitors coming for shorter periods of time (see Figures A9-A12).

This relationship also plays out within Switzerland: regions with a higher number of jobs in foreign multinational corporations tend to host more business migrant stays (see Figure A13). However, the correlation ($r = 0.96$) is only slightly higher than the correlation between the cantonal distribution of jobs in multinationals and the cantonal distribution of not posted stays ($r = 0.93$).

Finally, studying the impact of PTAs on business migrant flows is difficult for several reasons. For one, only three PTAs concluded by Switzerland entered into force in the period for which we can observe changes in posted worker flows (2015–2021): those with Georgia (2017), the Philippines (2018) and Ecuador (2020). Moreover, any potential effects of the latter will be masked by those of the Covid-19 pandemic.

[25] The only exception is when using staff in Swiss branches of foreign companies as independent variable. In this case, the correlation with posted workers loses significance after adding the controls (see Table 1 column 12).

Table 1 Cross-country business migration, trade and investment flows and mncs, 2015–2019

	DV: Number of posted workers											
	(1)	**(2)**	**(3)**	**(4)**	**(5)**	**(6)**	**(7)**	**(8)**	**(9)**	**(10)**	**(11)**	**(12)**
Bilateral trade	0.718***	0.324**										
	[0.071]	[0.133]										
Outward FDI			0.682***	0.381***								
			[0.092]	[0.137]								
N CH companies abroad					1.144***	1.044***						
					[0.132]	[0.279]						
N foreign companies in CH							1.057***	0.446*				
							[0.254]	[0.228]				
Staff in CH companies abroad									0.960***	0.852***		
									[0.106]	[0.284]		
Staff foreign companies in CH											0.503***	0.040
											[0.132]	[0.137]
Observations	84	82	38	36	50	48	25	24	51	49	31	29
R-squared	0.557	0.621	0.603	0.716	0.612	0.667	0.429	0.808	0.627	0.640	0.333	0.751
Controls	NO	YES	NO	YES	NO	YES	NO	YES	NO	YES	NO	YES
$\chi 2$ from test posted = not posted	16.46***		8.87***		7.92***		6.01**		5.87**		3.71*	

Standard errors in brackets. Level of statistical significance: *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$. All variables are log-transformed, country means for the whole 2015–2019 period. Odd numbered columns include controls for GDP per capita in constant 2015 US$ and population in 2019. Bottom row reports the chi statistic from a Wald test that the coefficients for each independent variable are equal in seemingly unrelated equations with the number of posted and of not posted workers as dependent variables. Sources: Statpop (number of posted workers), Harvard Growth Lab (bilateral trade), Eurostat (outward FDI), Swiss National Bank and Swiss Federal Statistics Office (MNC staff and establishments in Switzerland)

To increase our sample size and make sure that results are not due to sample selection, we start by looking at the effect of PTAs on overall third-country labour migrant flows before focusing on posted workers. Using a staggered difference-in-differences model, we compare changes in migrant flows from countries after signing a PTA to those of countries that never signed a PTA (see Table A1 for sample). To safeguard against the limitations of two-way fixed effects models in the presence of multiple periods and variation in treatment timing (Roth et al., 2023), we use the estimator proposed by Callaway and Sant'Anna (2021). We find no effect of PTAs on overall labour migrant flows in the 2011–2021 period (Fig. 5), neither immediately after their signature nor in subsequent years. This null effect is robust to excluding control variables and PTAs without mobility provisions. Accordingly, plotting changes in the raw number of incoming labour migrants over the 2011–2021 period for each country with a PTA also shows that PTAs are not consistently followed/preceded by observable changes in migration flows (see Figure A14 for the Chinese case).

As could be expected based on these results, PTAs are also found to have no consistent effect on the number of posted workers for the three countries whose PTAs entered into force between 2016 and 2020 (Figure A15).[26] They also have no consistent effect on the volume of short stay business visas (Figure A16).

While surprising from the point of view of prior findings, which show a positive relationship between PTAs and migration flows, these results are consistent with recent findings regarding the mostly symbolic effect of non-trade policy clauses in PTAs (Ferrari et al., 2021). Our results regarding the effects of PTAs are likely different from those of prior studies (which use large-N dyadic data) due to self-selection processes linked to the period of study. Given that PTAs are not exogenous, countries selecting into signing a PTA earlier are probably the ones with the closest economic ties, which —as we show above— are correlated with migration flows. This endogeneity problem makes it hard to argue that PTAs *cause* migration flows, which is consistent with our null results. Nonetheless, of the PTAs studied here only China is a major trade partner and even here the signing of a PTA does not seem to influence labour migrant flows. The fact that posted worker flows do not appear to be driven by PTAs as such suggests actual trade and investment relations are more important than formal agreements.

Conclusion

We have provided a conceptualisation and empirical investigation of business migration as an often overlooked but important type of economic migration that has established itself as a crucial pacemaker of the global economy.

Combining insights from international trade law, globalised labour markets and migration studies, the article has introduced business migration as a trade and investment-driven highly skilled variant of a market model of immigration policy.

In a second step, the article offers the first systematic mapping of business migration based on detailed register and survey data. The case of Switzerland, a globalisation-champion that is highly dependent on international labour mobility, corroborates the deep interconnections between economic transformations and migration policy. Echoing earlier findings concerning intra-corporate transferees in the UK (Salt & Brewster,

[26] Again, this null effect is robust to excluding covariates.

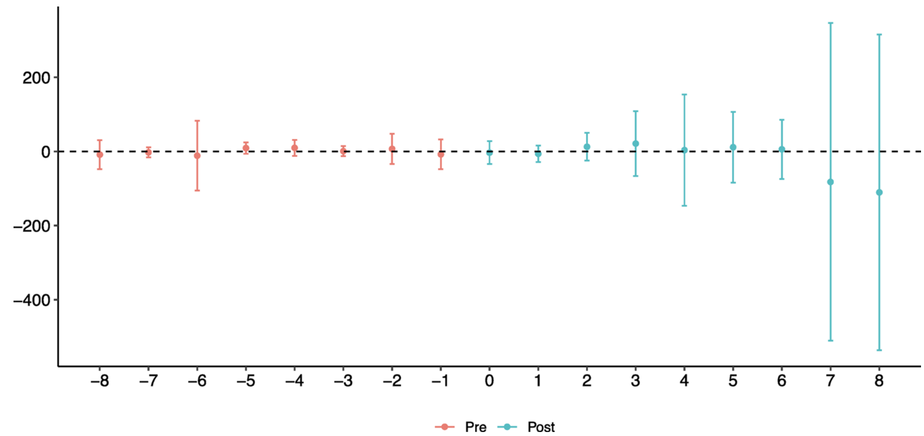

Fig. 5 Over time effect of PTAs on third-country labour migrant flows. Note: Event study estimates from staggered difference-in-differences model. X-axis is the length of time since/to signature of a PTA (referred to as 0). Includes controls for population and GDP per capita PPP 2017 (both log-transformed). See estimation details in the appendix. Source: STATPOP and WDI

2023), we show that business migration accounts for roughly 40% of all non-EU/EFTA labour migration in Switzerland. Business migration is strongly correlated with trade and FDI flows, as well as with the presence of MNCs. All this evidence, while correlational, supports our claim that business migration is inherently linked to transnational economic interdependencies and the shift toward service and knowledge-based economies. Our multi-level analysis of the regulatory framework further shows that business migration has been actively promoted both in international commitments in trade agreements and national legislation, creating important exemptions for highly qualified business migrants even in the restrictive immigration system of Switzerland.

We end by suggesting three promising avenues for future research. The first is to expand this analysis to other advanced economies, which would allow for the development of testable hypotheses by leveraging differences in exposure to transnational economic flows. The second avenue is to examine the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and digitalisation (and ensuing restructuring of work practices) on the demand for business migrants to shed more light on the structural drivers. Finally, in the context of deepening skill shortages and the simultaneous rise of anti-immigration parties, research should study to what extent and how business migration can escape politicisation and whether and when governments prioritise resorting to business migration over opening long-term immigration schemes.

Supplementary Information

The online version contains supplementary material available at https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-025-00483-7.

Supplementary Material 1.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all participants in the 2024 ECPRJointSession: Attractive States, Desirable Migrants: Examining Immigration Promotion Policies, and in particular Mireille Paquet and Juliette Dupont, for their helpful feedback and comments.

Author contributions

SL developed the conceptualisation of business migration. MA analysed the STATPOP registry data on the scope and correlates of business migration. PH analysed the regulatory framework in Switzerland. All authors developed the general argument of the paper and edited the text of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Funding
Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL. This research was supported by the National Center of Competence in Research NCCR– on the move funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (Grant number 51NF40-182897) and Horizon Europe project "Global Strategy for Skills, Migration and Development GS4S" funded by the European Commission and the Swiss State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation (Contact number 23.00497, 101132377)..

Data availability
The data that support the findings of this study stem from two main sources: first, data from the Swiss population registry (STATPOP), which we obtained from the Swiss Federal Statistical Office, and second, data from the Migration-Mobility Survey conducted by the nccr– on the move. The STATPOP data are available from the Swiss Federal Statistical Office but restrictions apply to the availability of these data, which were used under license for the current study, and so are not publicly available. The Appendix details the permission codes which were used for the analysis, based on which interested researchers can request the same data from the Swiss Federal Statistical Office. The data of the Migration-Mobility Survey are available in the Zenodo repository upon request, https://zenodo.org/records/7936301.

Declarations

Competing interests
The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Received: 27 August 2024 / Accepted: 28 July 2025
Published online: 11 August 2025

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