

New brains in EU with the Blue Card? Interview with Ewa Klamt

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Last Thursday, on 20th November, European Parliament in plenary has approved with a broad majority (388 votes in favour, 56 against and 124 abstentions) a proposal, for first advanced by the Commission and then amended in Strasbourg, concerning the conditions of entry and residence of highly-skilled workers coming from extra-EU countries.

It refers to the possibility for this category of immigrants to receive the "blue card" – as in the U.S.A for the same purpose it exists a "green card" – that it will allow them to live and work with their families near in European countries for a minimum of 3 years till a maximum of 5 years if it's renewed twice. As we'll see in the lines below, this decision has been taken to give a solution at the skill shortages in some economic sectors of Europe and to contrast the actual trend that sees USA and Canada as two of the most preferred countries for highly-skilled workers. The report of an euro-deputy, Mrs Ewa Klamt, has been the basis of the deliberation about the directive. So, we decided to reach her and ask some questions to understand better the true importance of this directive, the reasons for the birth of this proposal and the perspective of a European immigration policy. Mrs. Klamt, could you explain to our readers how does the EU-BlueCard work? «The objective of the Blue Card proposal is to introduce a fast-track and flexible admission procedure and favourable residence conditions for third-country nationals. A person applying for a Blue Card must either have completed a university study or must have a comparable professional experience of at least five years. The Commission had proposed a three-year minimum experience. The minimum salary which has to be paid for such highly qualified workers from third countries amounts to at least 1.7 times the average gross annual salary of employees in the EU. The Council favours a factor of 1.5, whereas the Commission had stipulated three-times the national minimum wage in its previous proposal. We need realistic and good criteria, which are interesting for the applicant and do not let the EU fall behind its main competitors, such as the USA, Canada or Australia. Once a Blue Card is issued, the Blue Card holder enjoys full mobility within the EU. After two years of legal employment in the first Member State, the Blue Card holder may seek highly qualified employment in a second Member State. Blue Card holders are also allowed to bring their families with them immediately. The initial validity of an EU Blue Card shall be of three years. The Blue Card is then renewable for at least another two years». What should the benefits be of this proposal for European Union and for the highly-skilled immigrants? «As you might know the EU is still not regarded as attractive by high-skilled workers. In the competition for the 'best and brightest', the EU comes off relatively badly by comparison with the traditional immigration countries such as the United States, Canada or Australia. Highly qualified workers from all third countries account for 1.72% of the EU's total workforce, which is also well behind other important immigration countries such as Australia (9.9%), Canada (7.3%), the US (3.2%) and Switzerland (5.3%). The 27 different admission regimes at present in the EU are the main reason for its low level of attractiveness as an immigration destination. As a consequence it is considerably more difficult for potential migrant workers from third countries to move easily from one Member State to another. Therefore, the objective of the Blue Card proposal is to introduce a fast-track and flexible admission procedure and favourable residence conditions for third-country nationals in order to make the EU more attractive for highly qualified workers. The benefits for the EU Blue Card holder are, on the one hand, the right to move freely within the EU and, on the other hand, the right to immediate family reunification as well as the possibility to take up highly qualified employment in a second Member State after two years». Some analysts and politicians criticized this measure because it could encourage the "brain-drain" from poorer countries, except for education and health sectors. What do you think about it? «In the European Parliament it has been agreed that the Member States should not actively seek to attract highly qualified workers in sectors that are already subject, or are expected to be subject, to a shortage of highly qualified workers in the third country. This applies to the health and education sectors in particular. Member States should establish cooperation agreements with third countries with a view to safeguarding both the Union's needs and the development of the third countries from which highly qualified immigrants come. The cooperation agreements should include ethical recruitment policies and principles and be strengthened by the development of mechanisms, guidelines and other tools to facilitate circular and temporary migration by which highly qualified immigrants may return to their countries of origin. Moreover, according to article 9 paragraph 2 of the Blue Card report, Member States may reject an application for an EU Blue Card in order to avoid a brain drain in sectors suffering from a lack of qualified personnel in the countries of origin». What are the sectors where European Union need more highly skilled workers? «First of all, I would like to mention that every Member State is able to determine the volume of admission of highly qualified workers from third countries. If there is no demand for highly skilled workers in a Member State, a Blue Card will not be issued. I can only give you some figures for my own country. For example in Germany, there is a demand for 95.000 engineers which cannot be met by the national workforce. According to a study of the Institute of German Economy there were about 165.562 vacant posts for highly qualified workers which could not be filled in 2007. Among them, 6.849 in the sector of Economics and social sciences, 8.130 in the masters, 3.192 in Law and 73.288 in Engineering and natural sciences». In your opinion, could the "Blue Card" be a first step towards a common immigration policy? «Yes, the Blue Card directive is a first step in the field of legal migration and toward a common immigration policy which allows highly qualified third country nationals to work and reside in the EU. Other directives in this field will follow (e. g. seasonal workers, remunerated trainees and intra-corporate transferees). Illegal migration can only be effectively tackled if we open up the door for legal migration and close the door for migrants coming illegally to the EU. That means, if the EU provides for prospects and offers of legal migration, countries of origin and transit countries will have an interest in joining the fight against illegal immigration». Mirko Gentili (published on November 30, 2008)