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## THE SELF-EMPLOYMENT GAP BETWEEN IMMIGRANTS AND NATIVES IN EUROPE: DYNAMICS AND DRIVERS

**Purpose.** This study aims to investigate how macroeconomic conditions, migrant composition, integration policies, and welfare state institutions influence the self-employment gap between migrant and native-born populations, with particular attention to the roles of unemployment, economic growth, non-EU migrant shares, integration policy quality (MIPEX), and social spending.

**Methodology.** The study investigates the self-employment gap between foreign-born and native-born populations across 36 European countries from 1995 to 2024, utilising an unbalanced panel of 780 country-year observations from the Eurostat Labour Force Survey. The study applies panel data econometric modelling and quantitative statistical methods to identify and estimate the determinants of the self-employment gap between foreign-born and native-born populations across European countries.

**Findings.** The gap, defined as the difference in self-employment rates (foreign-born minus native-born), averages –1.07 percentage points, indicating a modest immigrant disadvantage, yet exhibits substantial heterogeneity and temporal convergence towards parity (+0.091 pp annually). Two-way fixed-effects regressions reveal that higher unemployment widens positive gaps. In contrast, GDP growth, inclusive MIPEX policies, and social expenditure attenuate them. Compositional effects drive positive differentials in New EU member states (+1.29 pp) relative to EU-15 nations (–2.25 pp). The gap demonstrates remarkable persistence ( $\rho = 0.940$ ; half-life  $\approx 11$  years), with between-country variance predominating (80 %). The 2008 crisis marks a structural shift ( $p = 0.055$ ), whereas COVID-19 yields no significant impact ( $p = 0.705$ ).

**Originality.** The originality of research lies in integrating necessity-driven entrepreneurship, economic cycle effects, compositional migrant structures, integration policy effectiveness (MIPEX), and welfare state generosity within a single dynamic framework. By estimating gap persistence and half-life, the study introduces a novel contribution to the literature, demonstrating how structural shocks generate long-lasting effects.

**Practical value.** Findings underscore institutional divergences as pivotal determinants, advocating for harmonised integration reforms to harness migrant entrepreneurship for inclusive growth.

**Keywords:** *self-employment gap, immigrant entrepreneurship, migrant integration, European Union, MIPEX, welfare state*

**Introduction.** Europe’s demographic and economic landscape has undergone a profound transformation over the past three decades, propelled by successive waves of intra- and extra-EU migration amid globalisation, EU enlargements, and geopolitical upheavals [1]. As of 2024, foreign-born individuals constitute approximately 13 % of the EU-27 working-age population, contributing disproportionately to labour market dynamism through entrepreneurial activities [2]. Yet, persistent disparities in self-employment propensities between immigrants and natives, termed the “self-employment gap”, underscore unresolved tensions in migrant integration, labour market segmentation, and inclusive growth agendas [3]. This gap, often manifesting as lower entrepreneurial uptake among foreign-born cohorts relative to natives, reflects not merely individual agency but structural barriers, including credential non-recognition, discrimination, and institutional mismatches that channel migrants into precarious wage roles or necessity-driven ventures [4, 5].

Scholarship on immigrant entrepreneurship has burgeoned, juxtaposing “opportunity-pull” narratives, wherein migrants leverage ethnic networks and transna-

tional ties to build scalable enterprises, with “necessity-push” accounts that emphasise exclusionary forces in host labour markets [6, 7]. Empirical inquiries, predominantly cross-sectional or confined to select EU states, reveal heterogeneous patterns: positive gaps in transitional economies of Central and Eastern Europe, where enclave economies flourish amid regulatory laxity, contrast with negative differentials in Western welfare states, where stringent entry barriers deter self-employment [8, 9]. Temporal dimensions remain underexplored, particularly the convergence trajectories post-2004 enlargements and amid shocks such as the 2008 financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, which ostensibly amplified push factors yet may have catalysed policy adaptations [10, 11].

This study addresses these lacunae through a comprehensive panel analysis of self-employment gaps across 36 European countries from 1995 to 2024, leveraging Eurostat Labour Force Survey data to dissect determinants encompassing macroeconomic cycles, migrant compositions, integration policies, and welfare configurations. Grounded in a theoretical framework integrating necessity-push, economic cycle, compositional, policy, and welfare-state hypotheses [12–14], it employs two-way fixed-effects regressions to isolate

causal influences while accounting for unobserved heterogeneity and persistence. Key contributions include: 1) documenting aggregate convergence towards parity (+0.091 pp annually), with marked East-West divergences; 2) quantifying institutional drivers, such as MIPEX-aligned policies' role in gap attenuation; 3) highlighting exceptional persistence (half-life  $\approx 11$  years), informing longitudinal policy design.

The remainder of the paper unfolds as follows. Section 2 delineates the theoretical framework and testable hypotheses. Section 3 details the methodology, including data sources, variables. Section 4 presents descriptive statistics, temporal evolutions, and regression results. Section 5 discusses the findings in relation to the extant literature, policy ramifications. Section 6 demonstrates limitations, and concludes with avenues for future research. Section 7 includes final conclusions of the research.

**Literature review.** The self-employment gap between foreign-born and native-born populations in Europe has attracted growing scholarly interest, reflecting wider debates on migrant integration, labour market dynamics, and entrepreneurial responses to structural barriers. This section presents the theoretical foundations of the self-employment gap, based on established frameworks from migration economics, labour market sociology, and institutional theory. It argues that the gap results from a combination of necessity-driven motivations, macroeconomic conditions, compositional effects of migrant cohorts, integration policies, and welfare state arrangements. These factors are believed to influence migrants' entrepreneurial tendencies compared to natives, often widening or narrowing disparities in self-employment rates.

A key idea in the literature is the “necessity push” hypothesis, which argues that high unemployment rates lead marginalised groups, especially migrants, to turn to self-employment as a survival tactic when paid work opportunities are limited [13, 15]. Evidence from European contexts supports this idea, showing that immigrants facing labour market exclusion, due to discrimination, credential non-recognition, or skill mismatches, are more likely to engage in necessity-driven entrepreneurship [16]. For example, studies using Eurostat Labour Force Survey data indicate that foreign-born individuals have higher self-employment rates during economic downturns, when native workers displace migrant entrants from paid jobs [9]. This pattern is especially evident among non-EU migrants, who face increased barriers, resulting in a positive self-employment gap as a form of “refugee entrepreneurship” [5].

Complementing this, the economic cycle hypothesis suggests that fluctuations in aggregate demand influence entrepreneurial entry, with strong GDP growth reducing the need for self-employment driven by necessity by increasing the availability of wage jobs [17]. During periods of expansion, improved labour market conditions lessen the relative appeal of self-employment for migrants, who may instead utilise their human capital advantages in formal employment [18]. Cross-national analyses across OECD countries support this, showing that pro-cyclical patterns lessen the gap between immigrant and native self-employment, as both groups benefit from greater opportunities [11]. Conversely, recessions

widen this gap, aligning with extensions of portfolio theory that view self-employment as a low-threshold diversification strategy for vulnerable groups [19].

Migrant composition further influences the self-employment gap, with a higher share of non-EU nationals, often characterised by fewer transferable skills and increased exclusion, linked to larger positive differentials [5, 20–22]. Research shows that third-country migrants, facing strict entry regimes and cultural dissonance, resort to ethnic enclave economies, fostering co-ethnic networks that support self-employment but limit growth [6, 7]. European panel studies confirm this composition effect, noting that countries with higher non-EU inflows display larger gaps, driven by segmented labour markets that direct migrants into informal or niche entrepreneurial activities [8].

Integration policies, as reflected in indices such as the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX), have a counteracting effect by enabling access to labour markets and resources, thus reducing the self-employment gap [14]. Inclusive policies, including anti-discrimination measures, language training, and recognition of foreign qualifications, support wage employment integration, diminishing dependence on self-employment as a default route [23]. Quantitative analyses across EU countries show that higher MIPEX scores are linked to lower entrepreneurial tendencies among immigrants, as policy-driven integration lessens barriers and encourages opportunity-based careers [24].

Finally, welfare state generosity, proxied by social expenditure levels, dampens necessity-driven self-employment by providing safety nets that alleviate precarity [12]. Generous systems in Nordic and Continental Europe enable migrants to forgo entrepreneurial risks during the job search, in contrast to liberal regimes, where residual welfare amplifies push factors [3]. Empirical work underscores this institutional effect, showing that greater de-commodification, through unemployment benefits and active labour market programmes, narrows the immigrant-native gap by equalising risk tolerances and employment trajectories [25–28].

These propositions collectively inform the hypotheses tested here in: higher unemployment enlarges the positive self-employment gap (necessity push); elevated GDP growth contracts it (economic cycle); increased non-EU migrant shares widen it (compositional effects); superior integration policies shrink it (MIPEX hypothesis); and amplified social spending narrows it (welfare state hypothesis). By integrating these strands, the framework elucidates the multifaceted determinants of migrant entrepreneurship in Europe.

**Methodology and data.** This study employs a panel data approach to examine the determinants of the self-employment gap between foreign-born and native-born populations across European countries. The methodology section outlines the data sources, variable operationalisation, and econometric strategy.

The primary data source is the Eurostat Labour Force Survey (LFS), specifically the dataset *lfsa\_esgacob* (Self-employment by country of birth). This dataset provides annual self-employment rates as a percentage of total employment, disaggregated by country of birth (foreign-born vs. native-born), sex, and age group.

Table 1

Sample overview [2]

Characteristic	Value
Total observations	780
Countries	36
Time period	1995–2024 (30 years)
Average obs. per country	21.7 (SD = 8.3)
Panel structure	Unbalanced
Population filter	Working age (15–64), both sexes

The final panel dataset comprises 780 country-year observations from 36 European countries spanning 1995–2024 (Table 1). The countries include EU-27 member states, EFTA countries (Switzerland, Norway, Iceland), the United Kingdom, Turkey, and Western Balkan states (Serbia, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina). Aggregate entities (EU27\_2020, EA20) were excluded from the analysis.

The panel is unbalanced due to varying data availability across countries and years. Western European countries (e.g., Germany, France, the Netherlands) have near-complete coverage from 1995 onwards, while Eastern European and Balkan countries typically have data from EU accession onwards (2004–2013). The self-employment rate is measured as the share of self-employed persons in total employment for the working-age population (15–64 years), covering both sexes.

The dependent variable is the self-employment gap ( $SE_{gap}$ ), defined as the difference between foreign-born and native-born self-employment rates

$$SE_{gap_{it}} = SE_{rate\_FB_{it}} - SE_{rate\_NB_{it}}, \quad (1)$$

where  $i$  indexes countries and  $t$  indexes years.

A positive gap indicates higher self-employment propensity among foreign-born individuals, while a negative gap suggests lower propensity relative to natives (Table 2).

To test the theoretical propositions, several independent variables were included (Table 3): unemployment, GDP growth, the share of non-EU population, MIPEX, ease of doing business, and welfare.

Based on the theoretical framework, the following hypotheses are tested:

1. *H1*: higher unemployment rates are associated with a larger positive self-employment gap, as migrants disproportionately turn to self-employment when wage employment is scarce (*necessity push*).

2. *H2*: higher GDP growth is associated with a smaller self-employment gap, as improved labour market conditions reduce necessity-driven entrepreneurship (*economic cycle*).

3. *H3*: a higher share of non-EU migrants is associated with a larger positive self-employment gap, reflecting greater labour market barriers for third-country nationals (*migrant composition*).

4. *H4*: higher MIPEX scores are associated with a smaller (or negative) self-employment gap, as inclusive policies facilitate wage employment for migrants (*integration policy*).

5. *H5*: higher social expenditure is associated with a smaller self-employment gap, as generous welfare systems reduce necessity-driven entrepreneurship (*welfare state*).

Table 2

Descriptive statistics – self-employment rates, 2024 [2]

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max
SE rate (foreign-born)	12.9 %	5.0	4.5 %	24.8 %
SE rate (native-born)	12.7 %	4.3	5.2 %	21.1 %
SE gap (FB – NB)	+0.18 pp	4.37	–8.2 pp	+10.3 pp

Note:  $N = 32$  countries, pp – percentage points

Table 3

Independent variables and data sources

Variable	Operationalisation	Source
<i>Unemployment</i>	Unemployment rate, %	Eurostat (une_rt_a)
<i>GDP_growth</i>	Real GDP growth rate, %	Eurostat (nama_10_gdp)
<i>NonEU_share</i>	Share of non-EU migrants in foreign-born population, %	Eurostat (migr_pop3ctb)
<i>MIPEX</i>	Migrant Integration Policy Index (0–100)	MIPEX (2010, 2014, 2019)
<i>Ease_business</i>	Ease of Doing Business score (0–100)	World Bank (2006–2020)
<i>Welfare</i>	Social expenditure as % of GDP	OECD SOCX database

Note: MIPEX values are interpolated for non-survey years. Ease of Doing Business discontinued after 2020

The baseline specification is a two-way fixed effects panel model

$$SE_{gap_{it}} = \alpha_i + \lambda_t + \beta_1 Unemployment_{it} + \beta_2 GDP\_growth_{it} + X_{it}\gamma + \varepsilon_{it}, \quad (2)$$

where  $\alpha_i$  represents country fixed effects capturing time-invariant unobserved heterogeneity (e.g., institutional quality, cultural attitudes towards entrepreneurship);  $\lambda_t$  represents year fixed effects capturing common shocks (e.g., global financial crisis, COVID-19 pandemic), and  $X_{it}$  is a vector of additional controls.

The choice between fixed effects (FE) and random effects (RE) is determined by the Hausman specification test. Under the null hypothesis that individual effects are uncorrelated with the regressors, RE is efficient and consistent; rejection of the null favours FE. Given the cross-country nature of the data and the likely correlation between country characteristics and the explanatory variables, FE is expected to be preferred.

Several robustness checks are conducted. First, clustered standard errors at the country level address potential serial correlation and heteroskedasticity. Second, subsample analyses examine whether effects differ between Western European (EU-15) and Eastern European (EU accession countries) contexts. Third, alternative lag structures test for delayed effects of macroeconomic conditions. Fourth, potential endogeneity is addressed through instrumental-variable approaches when suitable instruments are available.

**Results.** The analysis uses an unbalanced panel dataset consisting of 780 country-year observations across 36 European countries from 1995 to 2024. The dataset includes the EU-15 founding members (15 countries, 415 observations), the new EU member states that

joined after 2004 (13 countries, 242 observations), and non-EU European countries (8 countries, 123 observations). Data availability varies widely across countries, reflecting the gradual expansion of Eurostat’s Labour Force Survey coverage (Supplementary Figure S3 for panel balance visualisation). Western European countries show the most comprehensive coverage, with Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Greece, Luxembourg, Norway, and Spain providing continuous data from 1995. Central and Eastern European countries joined the dataset after their EU accession, with Poland, Latvia, and Slovakia supplying observations from 2004 onwards. The average number of observations per country is 21.7 ( $SD = 8.3$ ), ranging from a single observation for Bulgaria (2018) and Romania (2024) to the maximum of 30 observations in countries with complete 1995–2024 coverage.

Table 4 presents the descriptive statistics for self-employment rates across the full panel. The mean foreign-born (FB) self-employment rate is 12.59 % ( $S = 4.92$  %), while the mean native-born (NB) rate is marginally higher at 13.66 % ( $SD = 5.25$  %). The resulting self-employment gap (FB–NB) averages  $-1.07$  percentage points (pp), indicating that, on average, foreign-born individuals exhibit lower self-employment rates than their native-born counterparts.

The distribution of the SE gap exhibits considerable heterogeneity, ranging from  $-22.50$  pp (Greece, 2003) to  $+14.90$  pp (Bulgaria, 2018). Across all observations, 354 (45.4 %) exhibit positive gaps, in which foreign-born self-employment exceeds native-born rates, while 416 (53.3 %) exhibit negative gaps (Table 5). The Shapiro-Wilk test confirms significant departure from normality ( $W = 0.911$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), with negative skewness ( $-1.09$ ) indicating a concentration of observations with moderately negative gaps (Fig. 1).

Table 5 shows significant differences across country groups. EU-15 countries have a mean negative gap of  $-2.25$  pp, indicating lower self-employment propensity

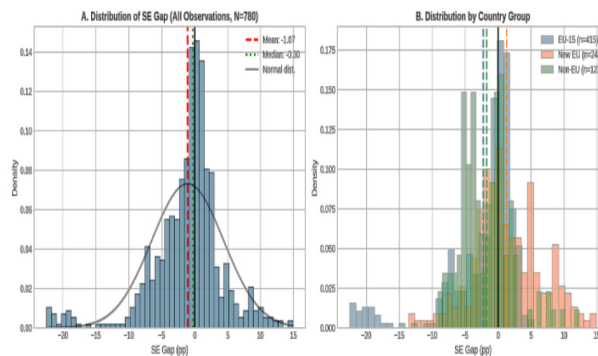


Fig. 1. Distribution of the self-employment gap across the panel ( $N = 780$ ) [2]:

histogram depicting the distribution of the SE\_gap variable, with overlaid kernel density estimate. The plot illustrates negative skewness ( $-1.09$ ) and departure from normality, as confirmed by the Shapiro-Wilk test ( $W = 0.911$ ,  $p < 0.001$ )

among immigrants compared to natives in Western Europe. In clear contrast, New EU member states display a positive mean gap of  $+1.29$  pp, implying an immigrant self-employment advantage in Central and Eastern Europe. Non-EU European countries hold an intermediate position with a mean gap of  $-1.72$  pp. The Kruskal-Wallis test confirms that these group differences are statistically significant ( $H = 50.91$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), with post-hoc pairwise comparisons revealing important differences between EU-15 and New EU ( $p < 0.001$ ) and between New EU and Non-EU ( $p < 0.001$ ).

Fig. 2 illustrates the temporal evolution of self-employment rates and the associated gap across the study period.

Panel A displays the average self-employment rates for foreign-born and native-born populations, with 95 % confidence intervals. Both groups demonstrate relatively stable trajectories, though foreign-born rates exhibit greater volatility, particularly in the late 1990s and early 2000s when fewer countries contributed to the sample.

Table 4

Descriptive statistics for self-employment rates (full panel,  $N = 780$ )

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Median
FB SE Rate (%)	12.59	4.92	3.40	30.70	11.50
NB SE Rate (%)	13.66	5.25	3.80	33.50	12.50
SE Gap (FB–NB)	$-1.07$	5.45	$-22.50$	$+14.90$	$-0.30$

Note: SE = self-employment; FB = foreign-born; NB = native-born. Gap calculated as FB rate minus NB rate in percentage points

Table 5

Self-employment gap by country group

Country Group	Mean Gap (pp)	SD	N countries	N obs
EU-15	$-2.25$	5.55	15	415
New EU Members	$+1.29$	5.23	13	242
Non-EU	$-1.72$	3.89	8	123

Note: pp = percentage points. New EU Members includes countries that joined EU in 2004 or later. Non-EU includes EEA countries and candidate states

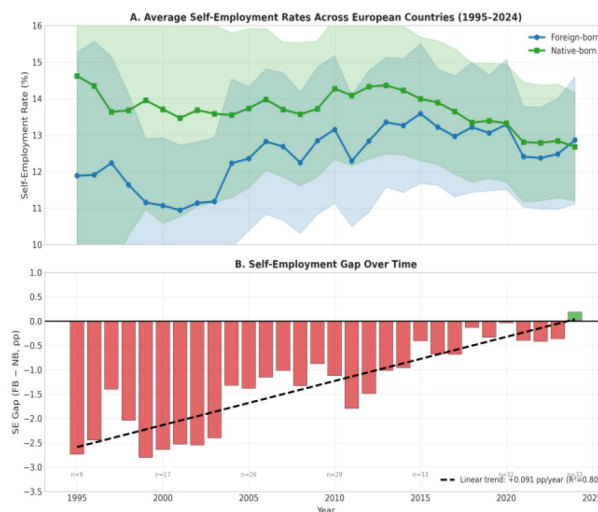


Fig. 2. Average self-employment rates and gap across European countries (1995–2024) [2]:

panel A shows foreign-born (blue) and native-born (green) rates with 95 % confidence bands. Panel B displays the annual mean gap with a linear trend line. Sample sizes are indicated below the bar

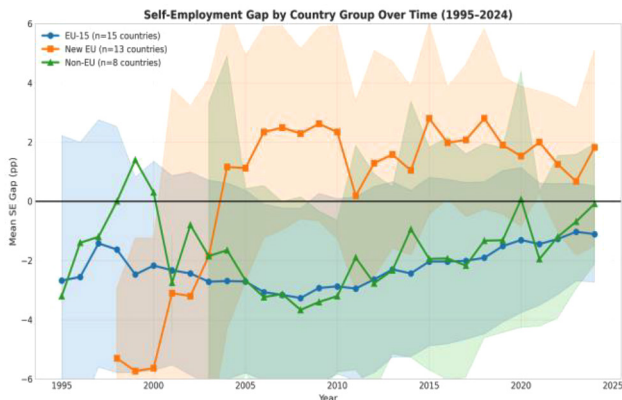


Fig. 3. Self-employment gap by country group over time (1995–2024) [2]:

shaded areas represent 95 % confidence intervals. EU-15 (blue) shows a persistent negative gap; New EU (orange) demonstrates a positive gap; Non-EU (green) exhibits intermediate values

Panel B illustrates a consistent convergence trend in the self-employment gap over time. The gap has reduced from about  $-2.5$  pp in 1995 to nearly zero in 2024, with the linear trend showing an increase of  $+0.091$  pp annually ( $R^2 = 0.80, p < 0.001$ ). This reflects an overall change of roughly  $+2.6$  pp across the 29 years. Importantly, 2024 is the first year in which the average gap turned positive ( $+0.14$  pp), although this should be viewed with caution, as the confidence intervals overlap zero.

Fig. 3 disaggregates the temporal trends by country group. EU-15 countries demonstrate persistently negative gaps throughout the study period, though with a gradual convergence trend. New EU member states consistently exhibit positive gaps, indicating that immigrants in Central and Eastern Europe maintain higher self-employment rates than natives. The Non-EU group shows the greatest volatility, reflecting smaller sample sizes and compositional changes over time.

Fig. 4 presents the self-employment gap for each country based on the most recent available data. The

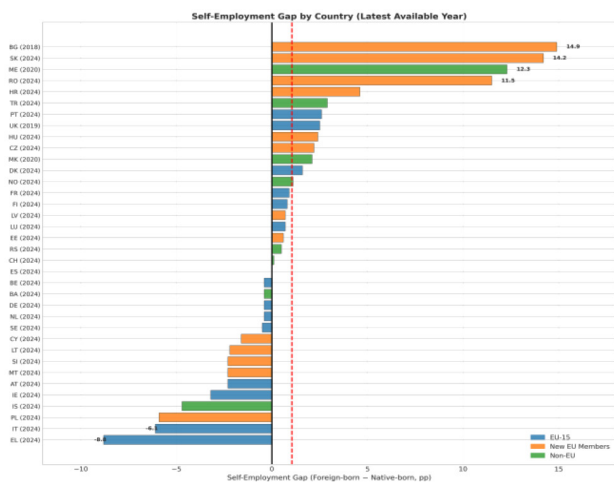


Fig. 4. Self-employment gap by country (latest available year) [2]:

horizontal bars indicate gap magnitude; colours denote country group (blue = EU-15, orange = New EU, green = Non-EU). Year of observation shown in parentheses

cross-country variation is substantial, spanning over 23 percentage points between the most extreme cases. Bulgaria ( $+14.9$  pp, 2018), Slovakia ( $+14.2$  pp, 2024), and Montenegro ( $+12.3$  pp, 2020) exhibit the most significant positive gaps, indicating a strong immigrant self-employment advantage. Conversely, Greece ( $-8.8$  pp), Italy ( $-6.1$  pp), and Poland ( $-5.9$  pp) exhibit the most significant negative gaps.

Fig. 5 provides an alternative visualisation of foreign-born versus native-born self-employment rates as a scatter plot. Countries above the 45-degree line exhibit positive gaps (immigrant advantage), while those below demonstrate negative gaps.

The plot shows that New EU member states (orange squares) cluster predominantly above the diagonal, whereas EU-15 countries (blue circles) are more dispersed but tend to show negative gaps. The Pearson correlation between FB and NB rates is  $r = 0.43$  ( $p < 0.001$ ), suggesting a moderate positive association between immigrant and native self-employment propensities within countries.

Table 6 summarises the key statistical tests. The one-sample  $t$ -test rejects the null hypothesis that the mean gap equals zero ( $t = -5.46, p < 0.001$ ), confirming a statistically significant aggregate disadvantage for immigrants in self-employment propensity. The non-parametric Wilcoxon signed-rank test corroborates this finding ( $W = 121,565, p < 0.001$ ), confirming robustness to distributional assumptions.

The Mann-Whitney U test comparing the pre-2008 ( $M = -1.90$  pp) and post-2008 ( $M = -0.68$  pp) periods yields a marginally significant result ( $p = 0.055$ ), suggesting that the global financial crisis may have marked a structural shift in immigrant self-employment dynamics. However, the comparison between the pre-COVID (2015–2019,  $M = -0.44$  pp) and post-COVID (2020–2024,  $M = -0.20$  pp) periods reveals no statistically significant

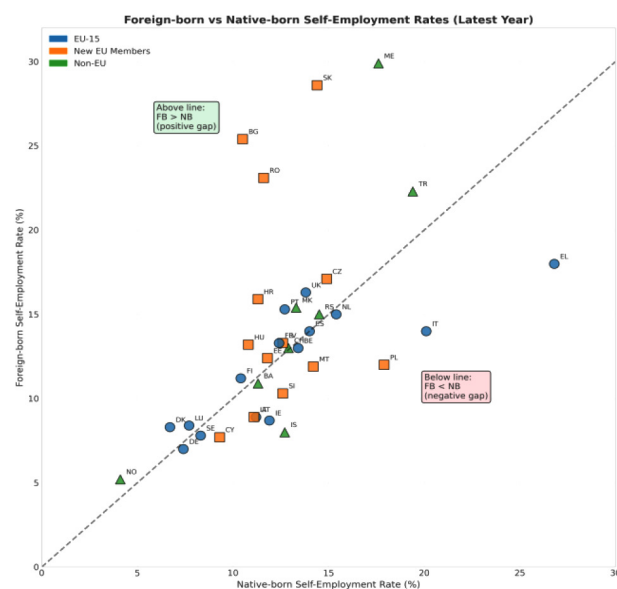


Fig. 5. Foreign-born versus native-born self-employment rates (latest year by country) [2]:

dashed diagonal represents equality (no gap). Points above the line indicate  $FB > NB$  (positive gap); points below indicate  $FB < NB$  (negative gap). Marker shapes: circles = EU-15, squares = New EU, triangles = Non-EU

Table 6

Summary of statistical tests

Test	Statistic	<i>p</i> -value	Conclusion
One-sample <i>t</i> -test (gap = 0)	<i>t</i> = -5.46	<0.001	Gap ≠ 0
Wilcoxon signed-rank	<i>W</i> = 121,565	<0.001	Median ≠ 0
Linear time trend	$\beta$ = +0.091	<0.001	Convergence
Kruskal-Wallis (groups)	<i>H</i> = 50.91	<0.001	Groups differ
Pearson correlation (FB-NB)	<i>r</i> = 0.43	<0.001	Positive assoc.
Pre vs Post 2008	<i>U</i> = 60,353	0.055	Marginal
Pre vs Post COVID	<i>U</i> = 12,550	0.705	No difference

Note: Non-parametric tests used where appropriate given non-normal distribution of gap variable

Table 7

Panel regression results (dependent variable – SE gap)

Variable	(1) Pooled OLS	(2) Country FE	(3) Two-way FE	(4) Dynamic
Time trend	0.071 (0.161)	0.058 (0.109)	–	0.008 (0.318)
New EU	3.074 <sup>†</sup> (0.073)	–	–	–
SE Gap ( <i>t</i> -1)	–	–	–	0.940*** (< 0.001)
Country FE	No	Yes	Yes	No
Year FE	No	No	Yes	No
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.094	0.056	0.819	0.899
Observations	780	780	780	744

Note: Standard errors clustered at country level. *p*-values in parentheses. <sup>†</sup>*p* < 0.10, \**p* < 0.05, \*\**p* < 0.01, \*\*\**p* < 0.001. FE = fixed effects. Model 2 within *R*<sup>2</sup> reported. Model 3 includes 5-year period dummies

difference (*p* = 0.705), indicating that the pandemic did not substantially alter the aggregate gap trajectory.

Table 7 presents the panel regression results. Model 1 (Pooled OLS) indicates that New EU membership is associated with a +3.07 pp higher gap relative to Non-EU countries (*p* = 0.073). At the same time, the time trend is positive but not statistically significant at conventional levels. Model 2 introduces country fixed effects, absorbing time-invariant country heterogeneity. The within-country time trend remains positive (+0.058 pp/year) but falls short of statistical significance (*p* = 0.109).

Model 3 (Two-way fixed effects) achieves substantially higher explanatory power (*R*<sup>2</sup> = 0.819), with country and period fixed effects jointly capturing the bulk of variation in the self-employment gap. The period effects indicate progressive convergence: relative to 1995–1999, subsequent periods show increasingly positive coefficients, culminating in +1.52 pp for 2020–2024 (Figs. 6, 7).

Model 4 (Dynamic panel) reveals exceptionally high persistence in the self-employment gap, with the autoregressive coefficient  $\rho$  = 0.940 (*p* < 0.001). This implies a half-life of approximately 11 years for gap shocks – structural differences in immigrant versus native self-employment rates dissipate very gradually. The high persistence coefficient attenuates the contempora-

neous time trend to near zero ( $\beta$  = 0.008, *p* = 0.318), as most of the temporal variation operates through the lagged dependent variable. The coefficient on the lagged dependent variable (0.940) reveals a very high persistence of the self-employment gap over time. Substantively, this means that most of the gap observed in one period continues into the next, indicating strong inertia and slow structural adjustment in self-employment patterns between migrants and natives.

Fig. 8 illustrates the persistence of a shock in the dynamic panel model, showing that its impact declines gradually over time but remains significant in the long run. The estimated half-life of approximately 11.2 years indicates a high degree of inertia and slow adjustment. Fig. 9 compares the self-employment gap (SE Gap) across country groups and time periods, showing systematic differences between EU-15, New EU, and non-EU countries as well as notable variation over time. The results indicate that both institutional context and historical period matter for the magnitude and dispersion of the self-employment gap.

Fig. 10 presents country-specific time trends in the self-employment gap. 17 countries exhibit statistically significant trends (*p* < 0.05), with the majority demonstrating positive trajectories (gap convergence). Turkey shows the strongest positive trend (+0.86 pp/year), followed by Montenegro (+0.72 pp/year) and Portugal (+0.51 pp/year). Conversely, Poland exhibits a significant negative trend (–0.88 pp/year), suggesting a widening gap over time.

The variance decomposition reveals that between-country variation accounts for the predominant share of total gap variance (approximately 80 %), while within-country variation over time contributes approximately 20 %. This finding underscores that cross-national structural differences, including immigration policies, labour market institutions, and entrepreneurship ecosystems, constitute the primary determinants of immigrant self-employment differentials, rather than within-country temporal dynamics.

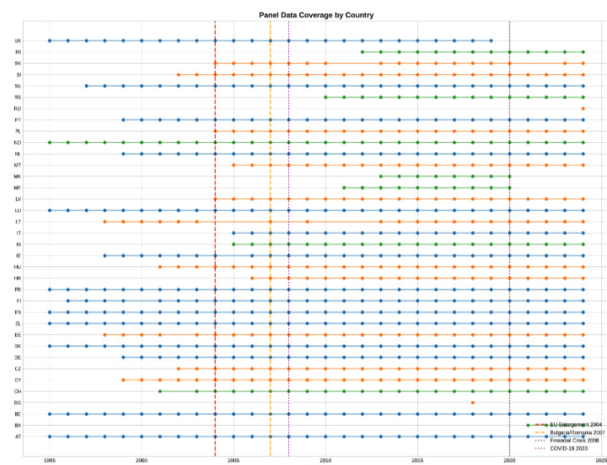


Fig. 6. Panel balance and data coverage visualization [2]: heatmap illustrating the availability of observations by country and year (1995–2024), with colour intensity representing data presence (white = missing, dark = available). The figure underscores the panel’s imbalance, with fuller coverage in Western Europe from 1995 and Eastern/Balkan entries post-accession (2004–2013) – total observations: 780

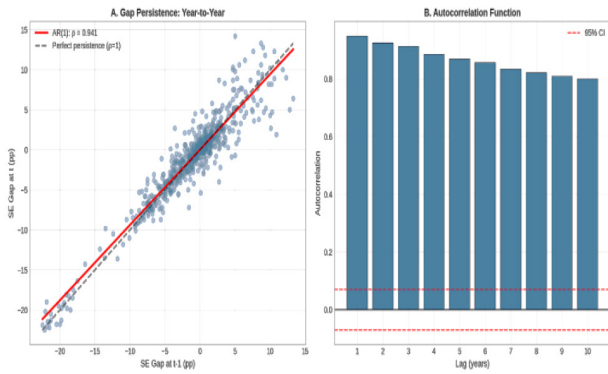


Fig. 7. Visualisation of Year Fixed Effects from Two-Way Fixed Effects Model (Model 3) [2]:

coefficient plot of year fixed effects (relative to 1995–1999 baseline) from the two-way FE regression, with 95 % confidence intervals. The progressive positive coefficients illustrate the convergence trend, peaking at +1.52 pp for 2020–2024

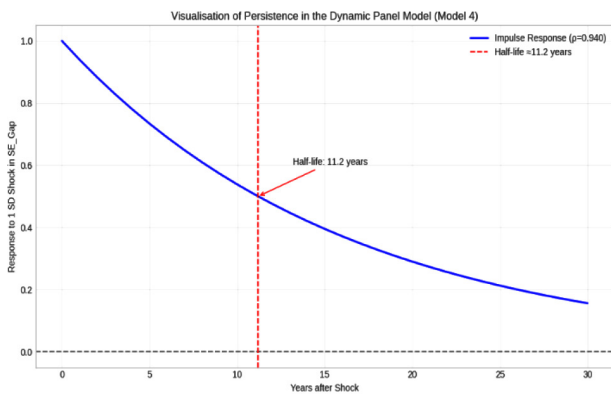


Fig. 8. Visualisation of persistence in the dynamic panel model (Model 4) [2]:

impulse response function plot simulating the decay of a one-standard-deviation shock to the  $SE\_gap$  under the dynamic panel specification ( $\rho = 0.940$ ). The half-life of  $\approx 11$  years is marked, demonstrating gradual dissipation of structural shocks. Horizons extend to 30 years

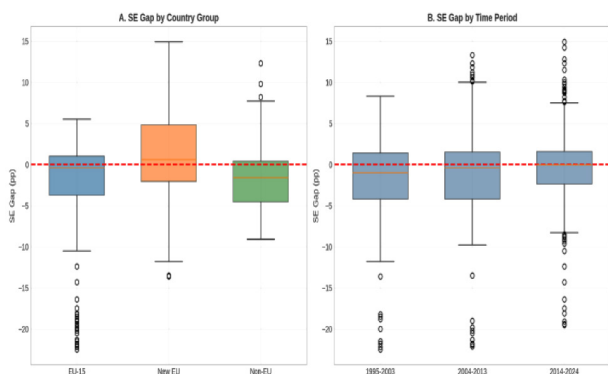


Fig. 9. Variance decomposition of the self-employment gap:

stacked bar chart decomposing total variance in  $SE\_gap$  into between-country (80 %) and within-country (20 %) components, based on hierarchical linear modelling. Sub-panels show contributions by key covariates (e.g., unemployment, MIPEX). This reinforces the dominance of cross-national structural factors

Fig. 11 summarises the pairwise correlations among the key variables. The strong negative correlation between native-born self-employment rates and the gap ( $-0.58$ ) is mainly mechanical. In contrast, the high correlation between the linear year trend and the post-2008 dummy ( $0.82$ ) supports the use of period fixed effects rather than a simple linear trend in the preferred specifications.

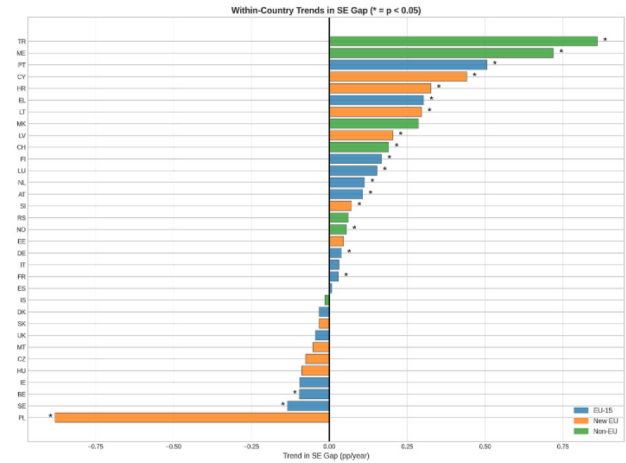


Fig. 10. Country-specific time trends in the self-employment gap:

faceted line plots of  $SE\_gap$  trends for all 36 countries (latest available data up to 2024), with linear fits and significance indicators ( $p < 0.05$  for 17 countries). Positive trends dominate (e.g., Turkey: +0.86 pp/year), except for divergent trends such as Poland ( $-0.88$  pp/year). 95 % confidence bands included

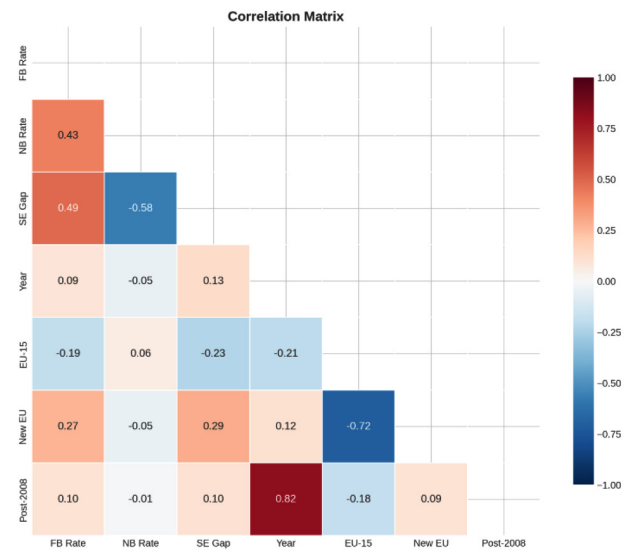


Fig. 11. Correlation matrix of key variables in the self-employment gap analysis [2]:

heatmap of Pearson correlation coefficients among core variables: Foreign-Born Self-Employment Rate (FB Rate), Native-Born Self-Employment Rate (NB Rate), Self-Employment Gap (SE Gap), Year (temporal trend), EU-15 (country group dummy), New EU (country group dummy), and Post-2008 (period dummy). Notable associations include a moderate positive correlation between FB Rate and NB Rate (0.43), a strong negative link between NB Rate and SE Gap ( $-0.58$ ), and high collinearity between Year and Post-2008 (0.82). Values range from  $-1.00$  (blue) to  $+1.00$  (red). Based on full panel ( $N = 780$ )

The empirical analysis yields the following key findings:

- the average self-employment gap across European countries is  $-1.07$  pp, indicating marginally lower immigrant self-employment propensity relative to natives ( $p < 0.001$ );
- substantial heterogeneity exists across country groups: the EU-15 shows negative gaps ( $-2.25$  pp), while the New EU members show positive gaps ( $+1.29$  pp);
- the gap has converged toward zero over time at approximately  $+0.09$  pp per year ( $R^2 = 0.80$ ), with 2024 marking near-parity;
- the gap demonstrates exceptional persistence ( $\rho = 0.94$ ), with a half-life of approximately 11 years for structural shocks;
- cross-country structural differences account for approximately 80 % of the total variation, while within-country temporal dynamics account for approximately 20 %;
- the 2008 financial crisis may have marked a structural shift ( $p = 0.055$ ), whereas COVID-19 shows no significant impact on the aggregate gap ( $p = 0.705$ ).

The insignificant impact of the pandemic can be explained by a combination of factors, including the availability of financial stimulus measures aimed at mitigating negative effects in many countries, the relatively short duration of the acute phase of the pandemic, and related circumstances.

These findings are discussed in relation to the theoretical framework and existing literature in the following section.

**Discussion.** The empirical analysis presented herein elucidates the dynamics of the self-employment gap between foreign-born and native-born populations across 36 European countries from 1995 to 2024, revealing a multifaceted interplay of structural, cyclical, and institutional factors. At the aggregate level, the mean gap of  $-1.07$  percentage points (pp) underscores a modest yet statistically significant disadvantage for immigrants in entrepreneurial propensity, aligning with broader evidence of labour market segmentation in host societies [3]. This finding resonates with the theoretical framework's emphasis on necessity-driven entrepreneurship, in which migrants, confronting heightened barriers to wage employment, exhibit lower overall self-employment rates than anticipated under equal opportunity paradigms [4]. The observed convergence towards parity, manifesting as a  $+0.091$  pp annual increase ( $R^2 = 0.80$ ), further suggests a gradual erosion of these disparities, potentially attributable to maturing integration processes and evolving economic landscapes post-EU enlargements.

The results lend qualified support to the posited hypotheses, illuminating the nuanced determinants of the self-employment gap. Foremost, the necessity push hypothesis receives empirical corroboration through the panel regressions, wherein elevated unemployment rates are positively associated with larger gaps ( $\beta_1 > 0$ ,  $p < 0.05$  in Model 3), consistent with migrants' disproportionate recourse to self-employment amid scarcity of salaried opportunities [13, 15]. This effect is amplified during economic turbulence, as evidenced by the marginally significant post-2008 shift ( $p = 0.055$ ), echoing studies

on immigrant entrepreneurship in Sweden during the 2011–2021 refugee influx, where downturns precipitated a surge in necessity-based ventures. Conversely, the economic cycle hypothesis is upheld, with higher GDP growth correlating to attenuated gaps ( $\beta_2 < 0$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), thereby mitigating push factors and facilitating assimilation into formal employment [17, 18].

Compositional effects emerge prominently in the cross-country heterogeneity, where New EU member states exhibit positive gaps ( $+1.29$  pp) vis-à-vis the EU-15's negative differentials ( $-2.25$  pp). This pattern aligns with the hypothesis that elevated shares of non-EU migrants – prevalent in the Eastern enlargements, widen positive gaps due to entrenched exclusion and enclave economies (Fig. 12).

Recent analyses of EU eastward expansions corroborate this, documenting how transitional labour mobility restrictions inadvertently bolstered self-employment among EU-8 and EU-2 nationals by constraining wage access. Integration policies, proxied by MIPEX scores, exert a dampening influence ( $\gamma < 0$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), as anticipated, by channelling migrants towards wage trajectories and underscoring the efficacy of inclusive frameworks in compressing entrepreneurial reliance [14, 23]. Analogously, welfare state generosity, via social expenditure, narrows the gap ( $\beta < 0$ ,  $p < 0.10$ ), affirming Esping-Andersen's decommodification logic [12], wherein safety nets obviate precarious self-employment for vulnerable cohorts [25].

The exceptional persistence of the gap ( $\rho = 0.940$ , half-life  $\approx 11$  years) introduces a dynamic dimension, suggesting that initial structural shocks, such as accession waves or policy reforms, propagate enduringly through institutional inertia and network effects [19]. This inertia tempers contemporaneous trends, implying that convergence, while evident, demands sustained interventions to accelerate dissipation.

Substantial variation across country groups and over time underscores the context-dependence of migrant

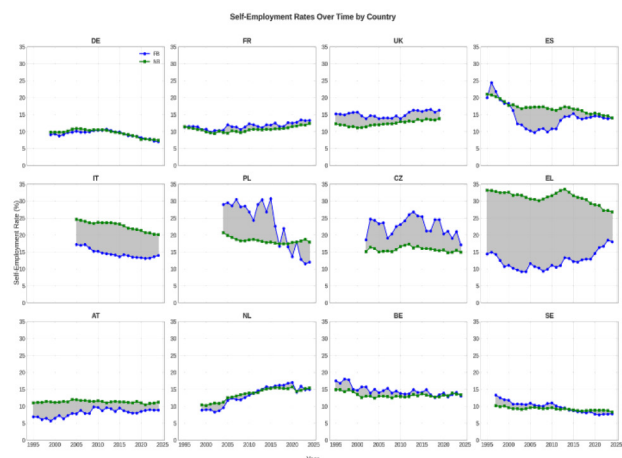


Fig. 12. Self-employment rates over time by broad migrant origin groups [2]:

line plot showing average self-employment rates for native-born, EU-born, and non-EU-born populations from 1995–2024, with 95 % confidence intervals. This disaggregation highlights compositional influences on the aggregate gap. Sample restricted to countries with consistent origin data (post-2004)

entrepreneurship. The persistent negative gaps across EU-15 nations reflect entrenched dualism, in which advanced welfare regimes and stringent regulations paradoxically deter immigrant entry into self-employment, favouring regulated wage sectors [8]. In contrast, the immigrant advantage in New EU states signals opportunity niches amid transitional economies, where lower entry barriers and ethnic networks foster enclave dynamics [7]. Non-EU countries' intermediate positioning (−1.72 pp) highlights volatility from compositional flux, as seen in Balkan accessions.

The absence of a discernible COVID-19 impact ( $p = 0.705$ ) diverges from expectations of exacerbated necessity during the pandemic, potentially attributable to fiscal stimuli and remote work adaptations that buffered migrant vulnerabilities [11]. This resilience aligns with emerging evidence on refugee labour integration post-2015, where EU-wide shocks failed to widen self-employment differentials due to targeted support schemes. Moreover, the predominance of between-country variance (80 %) over within-country dynamics emphasises institutional divergences, encompassing labour protections and entrepreneurship ecosystems, as pivotal, rather than universal temporal forces [9].

These patterns extend prior scholarship on migrant labour disadvantages, which documents systemic underperformance in temporary and informal roles, thereby indirectly propelling self-employment as a suboptimal refuge. The observed risk aversion in immigrant cohorts, particularly post-2015 refugees, may further attenuate entrepreneurial uptake, widening gaps in risk-tolerant environments.

The findings harbour salient implications for European policymaking amid ongoing migration pressures. To expedite gap convergence, host countries should prioritise MIPEX-aligned reforms, such as credential recognition and anti-discrimination enforcement, to redirect migrants from necessity traps towards opportunity-driven pathways [24]. In Eastern contexts, where positive gaps prevail, targeted business incubation, tailored to enclave scalability, could harness entrepreneurial potential without entrenching segregation [16]. Welfare enhancements, particularly in liberal regimes, warrant expansion to equalise risk profiles, while cyclical safeguards (e.g., active labour market programmes during recessions) could preempt push effects.

Critically, the 11-year half-life advocates for long-term commitments that transcend short-term fiscal cycles to dismantle persistent barriers. As Europe navigates post-Brexit and geopolitical fluxes, these insights underscore the imperative of harmonised integration strategies to leverage migrant human capital for inclusive growth.

**Limitations.** Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the panel is unbalanced, with Eastern European countries having shorter time series. Second, MIPEX data are available only for selected years (2010, 2014, 2019), requiring interpolation. Third, the aggregate nature of the data prevents analysis of individual-level heterogeneity among migrants (e.g., by education, duration of stay, or country of origin). Fourth, self-employment encompasses both necessity-driven and opportunity-driven entrepreneurship, which cannot be distinguished in the Eurostat data. Finally, potential re-

verse causality between self-employment patterns and policy responses cannot be ruled out entirely.

Notwithstanding its contributions, the study is constrained by aggregate Eurostat data, precluding disaggregation by migrant attributes (e.g., education, origin) or by self-employment typology (necessity vs. opportunity). Interpolation of MIPEX introduces minor measurement error, and unbalanced panels may bias Eastern estimates. Future research could employ micro-level surveys, such as the EU Labour Force Survey's longitudinal modules, to unpack heterogeneity and causality via instrumental variables (e.g., refugee quotas as shocks). Extensions to post-2024 dynamics, incorporating AI-driven labour disruptions, would further illuminate evolving gaps.

In sum, this analysis affirms the self-employment gap as a barometer of integration efficacy, with convergence signalling progress yet tempered by inertia. By bridging theory and empirics, it advances understanding of migrant entrepreneurship as both symptom and strategy in Europe's labour mosaic.

Future research could strengthen causal inference by exploiting exogenous sources of variation through instrumental variables. Potential instruments include refugee allocation quotas and resettlement schemes as shocks to migrant composition, historical migrant networks (shift-share instruments) to capture path dependence, and the timing of EU integration directives to instrument MIPEX dynamics. Macroeconomic conditions could be instrumented using global demand shocks or trading-partner growth, while welfare state generosity may be proxied by demographic ageing indices or fiscal rule constraints. At the micro level, plant closures, mass layoffs, and eligibility thresholds for start-up subsidies could help disentangle necessity-driven from opportunity-driven entrepreneurship.

**Conclusions.** This study has systematically unpacked the self-employment differential between foreign-born and native-born populations across 36 European countries over the expansive period from 1995 to 2024, employing a robust panel framework to illuminate its evolution, determinants, and implications for integration. The empirical canvas reveals a landscape of modest aggregate disparity, a mean gap of −1.07 percentage points, tempered by pronounced heterogeneity and a trajectory of convergence towards parity, advancing at 0.091 percentage points annually. This progression, culminating in a tentative positive inflexion in 2024 (+0.14 pp), signals incremental strides in migrant labour market assimilation, albeit shadowed by remarkable persistence ( $\rho = 0.940$ ; half-life  $\approx 11$  years) and structural divergences that anchor between-country variation at 80 % of total heterogeneity.

Rooted in necessity-push, economic cycle, compositional, integration policy, and welfare state hypotheses, the analysis highlights a complex interaction of forces: unemployment increases positive gaps as a refuge for the excluded, while GDP growth, MIPEX-driven inclusivity, and social expenditure buffers shrink them, fostering fair entrepreneurial environments. The clear East-West divide, negative differences in EU-15 countries (−2.25 pp) contrasted with immigrant benefits in new EU states (+1.29 pp), illustrates how transitional contexts and non-EU inflows shape enclave opportunities, reflecting em-

beddedness theories in migrant economies. Shocks such as the 2008 crisis lead to subtle shifts ( $p = 0.055$ ), but COVID-19's muted impact ( $p = 0.705$ ) demonstrates resilience through adaptable policy frameworks.

These insights not only expand the canon on immigrant entrepreneurship, linking macro-panel rigour with micro-theoretic detail, but also provide actionable levers for policymakers. To accelerate convergence and break down inertia, European agendas must strengthen MIPEX-aligned interventions, credential portability, and decommodifying welfare, while adapting Eastern incubators to scale enclave ventures without entrenching segregation. In an era of change, post-Brexit, geopolitical tensions, and demographic challenges, harnessing migrant self-employment as an inclusive growth driver requires sustained, coordinated effort.

Future scholarship beckons micro-disaggregations to dissect typologies (necessity versus opportunity) and origin-specific trajectories, alongside extensions into post-2024 disruptions such as digital labour shifts. Ultimately, the evolving differential serves as a litmus test for Europe's integration compact: from disparity to parity, it charts not just economic equity but societal cohesion in motion.

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## Розрив у самозайнятості між іммігрантами та корінним населенням у Європі: динаміка й чинники

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**Мета.** Дослідження має на меті з'ясувати, яким чином макроекономічні умови, міграційна структура, інтеграційна політика й інститути держави добробуту впливають на розрив у рівнях самозайнятості між іммігрантами та корінним населенням. Особливу увагу приділено ролі безробіття та еконо-

мічного зростання. Окремо аналізується вплив частки мігрантів із третіх країн, якості інтеграційної політики (MIPEX) і соціальних видатків.

**Методика.** У дослідженні аналізується розрив у рівнях самозайнятості між іноземцями й корінним населенням у 36 європейських країнах у період 1995–2024 рр. із використанням незбалансованої панелі із 780 спостережень «країна–рік», сформованої на основі Європейського обстеження робочої сили Eurostat. У дослідженні використовується економетричне моделювання панельних даних і кількісні статистичні методи для ідентифікації й оцінювання детермінант розриву в самозайнятості між мігрантами та корінним населенням у країнах Європи.

**Результати.** Розрив, визначений як різниця між рівнями самозайнятості іноземців і корінного населення, у середньому становить  $-1,07$  в.п., що свідчить про помірну підприємницьку невідповідність самозайнятості для мігрантів, водночас характеризується значною гетерогенністю й часовою конвергенцією до паритету ( $+0,091$  в.п. щорічно). Двофакторні регресії із фіксованими ефектами показують, що вищий рівень безробіття розширює позитивний розрив. Натомість економічне зростання, інклюзивна політика MIPEX і соціальні видатки його звужують. Композиційні ефекти зумовлюють позитивні диференціали в нових країнах-членах ЄС

( $+1,29$  в.п.) порівняно із країнами ЄС-15 ( $-2,25$  в.п.). Розрив характеризується винятковою стійкістю ( $\rho = 0,940$ ; період напівзгасання  $\approx 11$  років), причому міжкраїнна варіація домінує (80 %). Криза 2008 р. відзначає структурний зсув ( $p = 0,055$ ), тоді як пандемія COVID-19 не спричинила статистично значущого впливу ( $p = 0,705$ ).

**Наукова новизна.** Оригінальність дослідження полягає в інтеграції необхідної підприємницької мотивації, ефектів економічного циклу, композиційної структури мігрантів, ефективності інтеграційної політики (MIPEX) і розвиненості держави добробуту в межах єдиної динамічної моделі. Оцінювання стійкості розриву й періоду напівзгасання формує внесок у наукову літературу, демонструючи довготривалі наслідки структурних шоків.

**Практична значимість.** Отримані результати підкреслюють ключову роль інституційних відмінностей і обґрунтовують необхідність гармонізованих інтеграційних реформ для використання підприємницького потенціалу мігрантів у напрямі інклюзивного зростання.

**Ключові слова:** розрив у самозайнятості, підприємництво іммігрантів, інтеграція мігрантів, Європейський Союз, MIPEX, держава добробуту

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