

Universal health coverage and health worker maldistribution in the European Union: what roles and responsibilities for health managers?

Context

Health inequalities in the European region are persistent. The uneven distribution of health workers contributes to this issue. The freedom of movement within the European Economic Area, has resulted in a disproportionate flow of health workers to richer countries, undermining already fragile health systems in Central, Eastern and Southern European countries (see Figure 1).

This contrasts with the spirit of shared prosperity in the European Union. Higher level policy solutions are required to achieve Universal Health Coverage and SDG3 in all parts of the European Region.

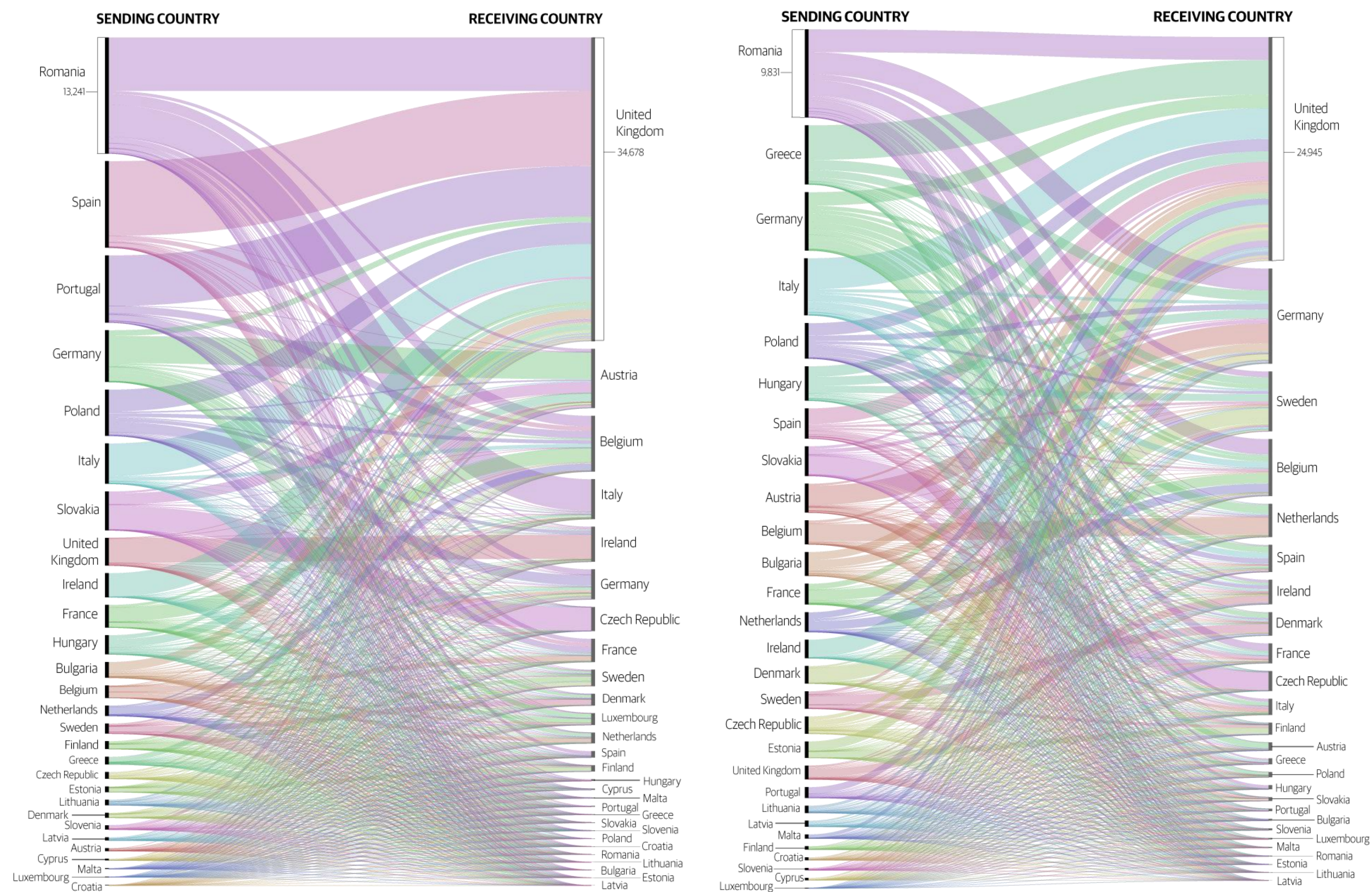


Figure 1: Health worker migration flows within the EU (left: nurses – right: doctors)
Source: POLITICO/European Commission regulated professions database 1997/1998-2016



Figure 2: Examples of Health Workers for All advocacy materials

Advocacy and results

The EU-funded Health Workers for All Programme (2013-2016) aimed to address this issue through targeted advocacy for sustained investments in the health workforce. Key results included:

- Improved monitoring, by civil society, of Member States' efforts to strengthen national health workforces.
- Enhanced awareness on existing codes of conduct for ethical international health worker recruitment ([WHO Global Code of Practice on the International Recruitment of Health Personnel](#) and the [EPSU-HOSPEEM Code of Conduct](#)).
- Increased collaboration between civil society organizations, professional associations, trade unions, employers' organizations and policy makers on health workforce issues.
- High-level policy dialogues with European Parliamentarians.
- A publication of in-depth case studies with best practices on how to improve working conditions, develop cross-border solutions to health worker shortages, enhance national health workforce planning and forecasting capabilities.

Discussion

The right of European health workers to move freely within the European Economic Area, develop professionally and build long-term careers, is a great good. However, active and targeted recruitment of health workers from countries with critical shortages is problematic and harming health systems in sending countries. Some key questions remain:

- How will we achieve SDG3 and UHC in the European Region, including a more just distribution of health workers?
- What are the roles and responsibilities of health managers? Do they only have a responsibility towards their facilities or also to stronger health systems across Europe?
- Is adherence to the codes of conduct for ethical international health worker recruitment sufficient?