

CASTLE2 OPENING RESEARCH REPORT (Executive Summary)

Research on Bangladeshi labour migration and transnational family social protection in Bangladesh, Greece and Romania



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CASTLE 2

Caring for the Vulnerable

Transnational Social Protection of Bangladeshi Migrants' Families in the EU

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Executive summary of the volume

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Executive Summary

Overview of the research

The CASTLE2 Opening Research Report (“Caring for the Vulnerable: Transnational Social Protection of Bangladeshi Migrants’ Families in the EU”) presents the first phase of a study of Bangladeshi labour migration to Greece and Romania and of the transnational families it creates. Produced by the CASTLE Centre at Babeş-Bolyai University with Terre des Hommes Romania, Bangladesh and Hellas, and funded by the EU through ICMPD’s Migration Partnership Facility, it combines desk research with early fieldwork across four parts: a scoping literature review; a review of policy at EU, Greek, Romanian and Bangladeshi level with a stakeholder mapping; a comparative review of labour migration cooperation agreements; and a preliminary qualitative report.

The organising framework is hybrid transnational social protection (HTSP). Rather than asking what a given state owes a migrant, HTSP asks what protective resources a person can actually assemble across borders from four providers — state, market, third sector and personal networks — under four logics of rights: citizenship, personhood, market and community. The distinction between what is legally available and what is practically reachable runs through the whole report.

The qualitative component draws on 43 interviews conducted in Bengali, Romanian, Greek and English, with 27 co-researchers recruited from transnational families shaping the guides, suggesting participants and in some cases conducting interviews. Data collection is ongoing, so the findings are explicitly interim and interview material has not yet been folded into the policy analysis.

Key findings

The research gap is real and largely unfilled. The HTSP framework is mature, Bangladeshi migration is extensively documented, and the Southern European and post-socialist welfare regimes are well described — but these literatures do not meet. HTSP has been applied to Latin American, Turkish, African and intra-European corridors, almost never to South Asian populations, and never in a post-socialist newly-receiving context. For Greece the evidence on Bangladeshi workers is thin; for Romania the review found no peer-reviewed studies at all.

Vulnerability is established before departure. Debt-financed recruitment, layered brokerage through licensed agencies and locally embedded *dalals*, and information asymmetry produce dependency that follows workers abroad. Intermediary costs average around US\$4,000 in privately intermediated corridors, against roughly US\$900 under the state-managed Korea–Bangladesh Employment Permit System — evidence that public intermediation works, and that its gains are reversible when private agencies return.

EU law distributes rights unevenly by status rather than by need. Protection is strongest for regular employment, high-skilled mobility and long-term residence, and weakest for seasonal work, where family reunification is effectively absent. This matters directly: Bangladesh was the second-largest beneficiary of EU seasonal permits in 2024 (53,567, or 19.6% of the total), while Bangladeshi nationals received only about 0.7% of Blue Cards. The pathway most used is the one carrying the fewest settlement prospects.

Greece offers broad rights on paper under tight conditionality. Admission is employer-driven and quota-bound; continued residence depends on permit renewal, which depends on meeting minimum insured-day thresholds. Losing a job therefore threatens legal status itself. Law 5275/2026 softens this by tolerating three to six months of unemployment, easing employer change and extending renewals, but does not dissolve the coupling.

Romania has expanded admission far faster than protection. Annual quotas rose from roughly 5,000 in 2014–2016 to 100,000 between 2022 and 2025 (90,000 for 2026). EGO 32/2026 replaces work authorisations with a single digital application, regulates placement agencies and opens a regularisation window to 31 December 2026 — yet the worker remains procedurally dependent on employer or agency. Integration services rest on project-based AMIF funding with attendant gaps in continuity and coverage, and the absence of a bilateral social security agreement with Bangladesh leaves acquired rights non-portable. The resident Bangladeshi population is around 5,200 per year, roughly 98% male and 61% aged 18–34, a profile that points to rising future demand for family reunification.

Bangladesh's framework is strongest where its own authority reaches. Registration, licensing, clearance, welfare financing and return assistance are well developed; wages, workplace safety, employer mobility and social-security portability are not, because these depend on destination states. Bilateral instruments vary widely in quality — an ILO assessment scored the agreements with Iraq, Jordan and Saudi Arabia at 8, 9 and 12 of 20 protection indicators. The 2022 Greece–Bangladesh MoU (up to 4,000 workers annually, with regularisation for around 15,000) opens a regular European pathway but ties market access to temporariness and return cooperation.

The interviews show the entitlement–access gap in operation. In Romania: residence-card delays of six months or more, employers retaining cards, dependence on employer consent to change jobs, family reunification requiring large proven bank balances and specific housing, and — because there is no Romanian embassy in Dhaka — repeated costly travel to India, with one family reporting €18,000 in total costs. In Greece: processing delays that shorten permits, family visas effectively unavailable, and heavy reliance on lawyers and brokers. In both, informal networks, co-nationals, employers, churches and community organisations carry protection that formal institutions do not deliver. Support also flows backwards, with origin families financing migrants. Children are the central motive and the central cost: education

drives migration, separation is prolonged, children born in either country do not acquire citizenship, and second-generation respondents in Greece increasingly plan to leave.

Takeaways

Protection in this corridor is assembled rather than delivered, and the binding constraint is not the absence of rights but their conditionality. Tying residence to a single employer converts ordinary labour-market risk into a threat to legal status, which in turn suppresses complaint and entrenches exploitation. Recruitment debt is the upstream determinant of everything that follows, so cost transparency, employer-paid recruitment and public intermediation are the highest-leverage interventions.

Family reunification is the main brake on settlement in both countries: income and housing thresholds price out precisely the minimum-wage workers the labour shortages attract, and reunited spouses do not gain automatic labour-market access. Informal and community provision is load-bearing and should be recognised as such rather than assumed away.

Practical priorities follow: bilateral social security agreements and portability, Bengali-language information and consular presence, decoupling residence from a single employer, and integration services funded beyond individual project cycles. The findings are interim — interview data is still being collected — so conclusions should be treated as provisional and revisited in later phases.