

Immigrant workforce integration and entrepreneurship in Austria, Italy and Hungary: A comparative mixed-methods study

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Abstract. Immigrant labour-market integration and entrepreneurship are increasingly decisive for the economic resilience of ageing, small- and medium-enterprise-dominated European economies. However, the institutional conditions shaping immigrant economic participation remain unevenly understood, and integrated cross-country comparisons within Central Europe are scarce. This study examines how and why the labour-market integration and entrepreneurial participation of immigrants differ across Austria, Italy, and Hungary. It adopts an exploratory, theory-informed comparative mixed-methods design based on a most-similar-systems logic, combining two evidence layers. The first consists of a battery of explicitly defined relative indicators calculated for each country, insofar as harmonised official data permit: the immigrant-to-native self-employment ratio (RSE), employment-rate and unemployment-rate gaps (ΔER , ΔER), and sectoral over-representation. These indicators are interpreted alongside the necessity indicators presented in the OECD International Migration Outlook 2024–2025. The second layer comprises primary qualitative evidence from thirty mother-tongue, in-depth interviews with family small- and medium-enterprise owners across the three countries. The interviews were thematically analysed and triangulated with secondary data. The analysis identifies three institutionally distinct integration regimes; demonstrates that immigrants' relative propensity for self-employment tracks the openness of wage employment rather than the general business climate, once the native baseline and immigrant-

Received:

June, 2025

1st Revision:

May, 2026

Accepted:

August, 2026

DOI:

10.14254/2071-
8330.2026/19-3/3

group composition are taken into account; and derives three culturally grounded resilience types: institutional-professional (Austria), adaptive-improvisational (Hungary), and community-emotional (Italy). The Austrian entrepreneurial ecosystem proves markedly more receptive to immigrant entrepreneurs than those of Hungary or Italy. The study contributes the first integrated mixed-methods comparison of these cases, a transferable relative-indicator framework, and a resilience typology linking institutional configuration to immigrant economic participation.

Keywords: immigrant integration, immigrant entrepreneurship, mixed embeddedness, entrepreneurial resilience, comparative mixed-methods

JEL Classification: J61, J15, L26, F22

1. INTRODUCTION

Ageing populations, persistent labour shortages and the intra-European mobility of native workers have made the economic participation of immigrants a structural concern for European economies, and nowhere more so than in the small- and medium-enterprise (SME) sectors that provide the bulk of employment and output. Across the OECD, migrant entrepreneurs already accounted for about 17% of the self-employed in 2022, up from 11% in 2006, and generated close to four million additional jobs between 2011 and 2021 (OECD, 2024). How immigrants are absorbed - into wage employment, into self-employment, or into neither - therefore has first-order consequences for growth, public finances and social cohesion.

Austria, Italy and Hungary are an instructive triad. They share a Central European space, an interwoven history reaching back to the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, and an economy in which family-owned SMEs form the backbone of employment; yet they occupy very different positions in the European migration system. Austria is a long-standing, high-immigration destination with a dense integration apparatus; Italy is a large Southern-European destination with a marked internal North-South divide and an unusually high native self-employment rate; and Hungary is a low-immigration, emigration-affected economy that has only recently opened managed labour-migration channels. Despite this analytically useful variation, the three have not been compared within a single, empirically grounded framework, and the scarce comparative work on the region tends to describe national situations side by side rather than to explain the differences between them.

This paper addresses that gap with an integrated, mixed-methods comparison. It asks not only how immigrant labour-market integration and entrepreneurship differ across the three countries, but why they differ, and it combines a macro layer of formally defined relative indicators with a primary qualitative layer of mother-tongue interviews with SME owners in the three countries. The study is guided by three research questions:

RQ1. Do Austria, Italy and Hungary constitute systematically different regimes of immigrant labour-market integration, and how can these regimes be characterised?

RQ2. How does immigrants' relative propensity for self-employment differ across the three countries, and how is it related to the openness of wage employment?

RQ3. Which institutional arrangements account for the observed differences, and which of them are transferable across contexts?

The corresponding hypotheses are not stipulated here; they are developed and justified in Section 2 as conclusions drawn from the theoretical framework and the empirical literature, and are then assessed in Sections 4 and 5. The contribution is fourfold. First, the paper provides the first integrated, theory-informed comparison of immigrant integration and entrepreneurship across these three cases. Second, it specifies a compact, formally defined framework of relative indicators - benchmarking immigrant outcomes against native outcomes rather than reporting immigrant shares in isolation - that renders the cases genuinely comparable and is transportable to other country sets. Third, drawing on thirty original mother-tongue interviews, it derives a typology of three culturally grounded resilience patterns that links institutional configuration to entrepreneurial behaviour. Fourth, it offers an empirically qualified account of necessity versus opportunity entrepreneurship, showing where the standard reading holds and where it must be corrected for national self-employment baselines and immigrant-group composition.

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows. Section 2 develops the theoretical framework and derives the hypotheses. Section 3 sets out the mixed-methods design, the data and the analytical strategy. Section 4 reports the quantitative and qualitative results. Section 5 discusses them against prior findings, and Section 6 concludes with contributions, implications, limitations and directions for further research.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES

The framework integrates four perspectives - the dual labour market, mixed embeddedness, national business systems, and the family-firm resilience literature - within a three-level analytical logic that runs from the macro-institutional level, through the level of the firm and its opportunity structure, to the individual entrepreneur. The first three subsections each close by deriving one hypothesis; the fourth prepares the ground for the qualitative analysis of resilience.

2.1. Opportunity structures, segmentation and national business systems

Dual-labour-market theory holds that advanced economies are segmented into a primary segment of stable, well-paid jobs and a secondary segment of insecure, low-paid ones, and that immigrants are recruited disproportionately into the latter (Piore, 1980). Linguistic and cultural distance reinforces this allocation: Belot and Ederveen (2012), Kochaniak et al. (2024) show that migration flows are larger and more successful between culturally proximate countries, and Adsera and Pytliková (2015), Tutar et al. (2025) document that weaker host-language proficiency depresses immigrants' outcomes. D'Amuri and Peri (2014) add that immigrants concentrate in manual rather than communication-intensive tasks, allowing natives to move up the occupational ladder, while segmented-assimilation theory (Portes & Zhou, 1993) explains why trajectories diverge sharply by group. Whitley's (1999) national-business-systems approach supplies the missing macro layer: firms and labour markets are structured by nationally specific institutional configurations - of the state, financial system, skill formation and trust relations - so that the same segmentation mechanisms yield systematically different outcomes across countries.

Recent European evidence confirms that these mechanisms operate but that their intensity is institutionally contingent. The OECD (2024) reports that immigrants remain over-represented in accommodation, food and personal services across member states, with outcomes varying widely by national policy. Country data sharpen the point: in Italy the non-EU employment rate stood at 57.6% against 61.6% for Italians in 2024, with unemployment at 10.2% versus 6.1% (Ministero del Lavoro, 2025); in Austria the foreign workforce shows a polarised qualification structure (Statistics Austria, 2024); and in Hungary, where overall employment is among the highest in the EU (75.1% in 2024) yet the labour market is markedly segmented, immigrant labour is concentrated in guest-worker manufacturing roles (Menyhért, 2025; Bodor, 2024). These are three configurations of the same mechanisms, not three instances of one pattern. Hence:

H1. Despite their shared regional setting, Austria, Italy and Hungary constitute distinct, institutionally grounded regimes of immigrant labour-market integration, differing systematically in employment access, sectoral allocation and the role of self-employment.

2.2. Necessity, opportunity and the wage-employment channel

The mixed-embeddedness approach explains immigrant business formation as the product of the interaction between migrants' own resources and the host-country opportunity structure of markets and regulation (Kloosterman et al., 1999; Kloosterman & Rath, 2001). Otherwise, it may cause outmigration, especially in youth cohorts (Mishchuk & Oliinyk, 2025; Sulkowski et al., 2025). A central implication is that self-employment is often a response to blocked wage employment - the necessity-versus-opportunity distinction. Subsequent work has refined the framework: Barberis and Solano (2018) and Krol et al. (2026) review its trajectory, Solano et al. (2022) extend it to the multifocal, cross-border character of contemporary migrant business, and Högberg and Mitchell (2022) reconnect it to entrepreneurial agency. Comparative evidence within Europe has long suggested a North-South contrast (Baycan-Levent & Nijkamp, 2009).

The most recent evidence gives this its clearest empirical form. The OECD (2024) finds that in about two-thirds of member countries the foreign-born are more likely than the native-born to be own-account self-employed, that newly self-employed immigrants are disproportionately drawn from prior unemployment, and that the opportunity share of entrepreneurship is procyclical - necessity entrepreneurship rises when wage employment contracts. Immigrants are also more likely than natives to exit self-employment into unemployment, markedly so in Austria. For Italy, Bolazzi and Fellini (2025) and Brunetti and Zaiceva (2025) show that immigrant self-employment reflects both pre-migration experience and blocked-mobility dynamics, while Gawęł and Toikko (2024) link female immigrant entrepreneurship to host-country opportunity conditions. This literature implies that the analytically relevant quantity is not the immigrant self-employment share as such, but immigrants' propensity relative to natives, read together with the necessity indicators; the relationship should track the openness of wage employment rather than the general business climate. Hence:

H2. Immigrants' relative self-employment propensity, and its necessity character, are governed by the openness of the host labour market - by barriers to wage employment rather than by the general business climate - so that constrained wage-employment access is associated with a higher necessity-driven propensity, and open, well-supported access with a lower one.

2.3. Institutional support architecture, entrepreneurial ecosystems and transferability

If outcomes are institutionally contingent, the configuration of support institutions should account for cross-country differences and, in principle, offer transferable instruments. Isenberg's (2010) entrepreneurial-ecosystem model - policy, markets, human capital, finance, support organisations and culture - provides a systematic frame for comparing the three national ecosystems, complementing the regulatory emphasis of the mixed-embeddedness literature (Kloosterman & Rath, 2001; Solano et al., 2022). Studies of Central and Eastern Europe argue that preparing for integration is a permanent task for employers, policymakers and society (Bite et al., 2020; Chugaievska et al., 2026; Smallbone et al., 2017). Country evidence indicates that dense, well-funded architectures coincide with stronger wage-employment integration - Austria's occupation-specific language courses, qualification-recognition subsidies and equal-terms enterprise support through the Economic Chamber and the Public Employment Service (ÖIF, 2024; Statistics Austria, 2024) - whereas thinner architectures coincide with weaker or more fragmented integration, as in Hungary's recently reconfigured guest-worker system (OECD, 2025; Bodor, 2024) and in Southern Italy. Case evidence on immigrant entrepreneurs in Hungary underlines the weight of the host institutional environment

(Sarihasan, 2026). Transfer, however, is unlikely to be wholesale, since instruments presuppose administrative capacity and political framing. Accordingly:

H3. Cross-country differences in immigrant economic integration reflect differences in the institutional support architecture, and specific instruments are selectively - not wholesale - transferable across the three contexts, conditional on administrative capacity and policy framing.

2.4. Family embeddedness, socioemotional wealth and resilience

Immigrant and native SMEs alike are predominantly family-embedded, and much immigrant enterprise relies on family and co-ethnic networks precisely because access to external finance and institutions is initially constrained (Baycan-Levent & Nijkamp, 2009). The socioemotional-wealth perspective (Gómez-Mejía et al., 2007) holds that family owners weight the preservation of control, identity and emotional attachment alongside financial return, shaping decisions on finance, formalisation and risk. The resilience literature, in turn, distinguishes reactive, adaptive and proactive responses to shocks (Herbane, 2010; Bhamra et al., 2011; Amann & Jaussaud, 2012; Miller & Le Breton-Miller, 2006; Tutar & Bilan, 2026), but has rarely been applied comparatively across national institutional settings. This gap motivates the qualitative component of the present study, which examines whether resilience takes culturally and institutionally distinct forms across the three cases - a question pursued inductively rather than through a pre-set hypothesis.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research design

The study uses an exploratory, theory-informed comparative mixed-methods design (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017; Yin, 2018), structured on a most-similar systems logic (Przeworski & Teune, 1970). Austria, Italy and Hungary are held constant on many dimensions - all are EU members with a common SME definition and harmonised statistics, all sit in the Central European cultural space, and in all three the SME sector is the backbone of employment - while they differ systematically in immigration regime and institutional configuration, so that observed differences in immigrant outcomes can be attributed with more confidence to those institutional differences. Two evidence layers are combined with distinct functions: a quantitative secondary layer establishes the comparative macro pattern through explicitly defined relative indicators, and a primary qualitative layer of mother-tongue interviews interprets and contextualises that pattern at the level of the firm and the individual entrepreneur. The design is interpretive and comparative rather than econometric: it establishes whether observed cross-country patterns are consistent with the competing theoretical expectations, and follows Yin's (2018) logic of analytic - not statistical - generalisation.

3.2. Secondary data and relative indicators

The secondary analysis draws on official statistics and peer-reviewed research published mainly in 2024-2026, organised in a three-tier hierarchy: supranational harmonised data (OECD International Migration Outlook 2024 and 2025; Eurostat); national official statistics (Statistics Austria; the Italian Ministry of Labour, IDOS-CNA and Leone Moressa reports; Hungarian KSH-based sources); and recent scholarly studies used to interpret the indicators. To move from description to structured comparison, immigrant outcomes are expressed relative to native outcomes. For a given country, let ER, UR and SE denote the employment rate, the unemployment rate and the self-employment share (the self-employed as a proportion

of the employed), with subscripts i and n for the immigrant and native populations, and let $sh(i, s)$ and $sh(all, s)$ denote the immigrant and total shares of employment in sector s . Four relative indicators are defined:

$$\begin{aligned}\Delta ER &= ER_i - ER_n && (\text{employment-rate gap}) \\ \Delta UR &= UR_i - UR_n && (\text{unemployment-rate gap}) \\ RSE &= SE_i / SE_n && (\text{relative self-employment ratio}) \\ SOR_s &= sh(i, s) / sh(all, s) && (\text{sectoral over-representation})\end{aligned}$$

RSE is the analytically central measure: values below 1 indicate a lower immigrant than native self-employment propensity and values above 1 the reverse, so the same number is comparable across countries with very different self-employment baselines, independently of the absolute size of the immigrant population. These relative indicators are read together with the OECD (2024) necessity indicators - transitions into self-employment from unemployment, the procyclical opportunity share, and exit from self-employment into unemployment. Given three cases, and for Hungary the absence of a dedicated official statistic on immigrant self-employment (Section 3.4), the indicators are treated as transparent descriptive summaries for cross-case comparison, not as inferential statistics; where an indicator cannot be reliably estimated it is reported as such rather than imputed.

3.3. Primary qualitative data

The qualitative layer rests on thirty semi-structured in-depth interviews with family-SME owners - ten in each country (coded H1-H10 for Hungary, A1-A10 for Austria, I1-I10 for Italy) - supplemented by three expert interviews (HE, AE, IE). Interviewees were reached by purposive snowball sampling, appropriate for a population that is not accessible from public sampling frames and shares sensitive business information only on a basis of trust (Atkinson & Flint, 2001; Saunders et al., 2019). The sample spans a wide range of sectors (hospitality, retail, personal services, accounting, joinery, textiles, bakery, agriculture, law, construction, education) and is balanced by gender and generation; interviewees were aged 35-60. Interviews were conducted between mid-2024 and early 2025, lasted 60-90 minutes, and - a decision central to validity - were held in each interviewee's mother tongue (Hungarian, German or Italian), preserving linguistic authenticity in accounts of risk perception, trust and family decisions. Transcripts were analysed by thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and triangulated against the secondary statistics and a supporting exploratory survey on digital work forms; thematic saturation was reached by the eighth or ninth interview in each national block (Guest et al., 2006).

One feature of the sample is itself a finding and is reported transparently: seven of the ten Austrian interviewees are first-generation immigrants (Polish, Croatian, Hungarian and Italian nationals), against one of ten in each of the Hungarian and Italian samples. Unanticipated at the design stage, this pattern reflects the immigrant-rich reality of the Viennese SME ecosystem and is treated below as evidence of that ecosystem's receptivity, not as a representative measure of the national SME population.

3.4. Validity, ethics and limitations

Validity rests on triangulation across three independent sources - secondary statistics, the survey, and the interviews - whose convergence strengthens each conclusion, and on analytic generalisation to the theoretical constructs (mixed embeddedness, national business systems, resilience typology) rather than to populations (Yin, 2018; Maxwell, 2013). Ethical procedures followed the GDPR and standard social-science norms: informed consent, anonymised codes, aggregated survey handling and destruction of recordings after processing; anonymity mattered especially in Southern Italy. Three limitations bound the claims that follow. First, cross-national comparability is constrained by definitional heterogeneity between national

systems; the relative-indicator strategy and the priority given to harmonised sources mitigate but do not eliminate this. Second, the samples are purposive and small, so the qualitative findings are analytically, not statistically, generalisable, and the Hungarian evidence base on immigrant self-employment is thin, since no dedicated official statistic is published. Third, the design is comparative and case-based, not econometric: it examines whether observed patterns are consistent with theory across three cases, but cannot estimate causal magnitudes at the individual level. The natural next step - individual-level estimation on harmonised microdata such as the EU Labour Force Survey scientific-use files - is identified in Section 6 as a priority for future work.

4. EMPIRICAL RESULTS

4.1. Three integration regimes

The scale of immigration differs sharply across the three cases (Table 1): resident foreign nationals make up about 20.6% of the population in Austria, 8.5% in Italy and 2.6% in Hungary. The macro-institutional setting differs in the same direction: GDP per capita in purchasing-power terms stands at roughly 130% of the EU average in Austria, 95% in Italy and 76% in Hungary, and digital maturity, captured by the Digital Economy and Society Index, ranges from 71% in Italy and 64% in Austria to 34% in Hungary (European Commission, 2022; Statistics Austria, 2024). Sectoral allocation, by contrast, is structurally similar in direction: non-EU citizens are over-represented in accommodation and food services, cleaning and domestic work, and under-represented in credential- and language-intensive roles such as public administration, education and engineering; in Italy foreign workers concentrate in personal services (30.9%), agriculture (20%), hotels and restaurants (18.5%) and construction (16.9%) (Ministero del Lavoro, 2025). The direction is common to all three, consistent with dual-labour-market theory, but the employment and unemployment gaps that accompany it differ by regime (Table 2).

Table 1

Immigration and employment counts, Austria, Hungary and Italy, 2024

Country	Resident population	Foreign residents	Foreign share of population	Working-age residents (15-64)	Working-age foreign residents (15-64)	Immigrant-owned businesses
Austria	9,158,750	1,891,184	20.6%	4,483,000	898,500	122,100
Hungary	9,584,627	250,912	2.6%	6,271,000	100,818	13,900
Italy	58,853,482	5,000,000	8.5%	37,361,962	2,400,000	659,709

Source: authors' compilation from Eurostat and national statistical offices. Foreign share = foreign residents / resident population. Hungarian immigrant-business figures are estimates (Section 3.4).

4.2. Relative self-employment propensity (RSE): assessing H2

The analytically decisive comparison is immigrants' self-employment propensity relative to natives, captured by RSE (Table 2). Because RSE is a ratio of rates - the self-employment share among the employed for each group - it is distinct from the absolute number of immigrant firms, so a country may have few immigrant businesses yet a high or a low propensity. In Italy the immigrant self-employment rate (12.9%) is well below the native rate (20.9%), giving $RSE \approx 0.62$ (IDOS & CNA, 2025); yet immigrant-run businesses grew by 46.9% between 2011 and 2024 while Italian-run firms fell by 7.9%, reaching about 666,000 units and 11.3% of all independent activities. Austria sits just below parity (RSE slightly under 1), the self-employment propensity of the migration-background population being marginally below that of natives (OECD, 2024; Statistics Austria, 2024). For Hungary the ratio cannot be reliably estimated: no official

statistic on immigrant self-employment is published, and the recent inflow is dominated by wage-employed guest workers, whose low self-employment coexists with a small, settled Chinese and Vietnamese community in which entrepreneurship is concentrated. The OECD (2024) reports an above-native self-employment rate for the Central and Eastern European foreign-born, but this predates the guest-worker surge; the current Hungarian RSE is therefore treated as indeterminate rather than assumed to exceed one.

Read through the necessity indicators, these apparently divergent figures are coherent. The low Italian ratio does not signal weak immigrant entrepreneurialism; it reflects an unusually high native self-employment baseline, against which the anticyclical growth of immigrant firms and their concentration in specific niches is precisely the necessity dynamic that mixed-embeddedness theory predicts under constrained wage employment. Austria's below-parity ratio coincides with the most open and best-supported wage-employment channel of the three, so that self-employment is one option among several rather than a fallback - although immigrants there are also more likely than natives to exit self-employment into unemployment (OECD, 2024). Hungary, where the ratio cannot be reliably estimated, combines a large wage-employed guest-worker inflow with a small settled community in which entrepreneurship concentrates, so that no single aggregate ratio summarises it. The clearest evidence for H2 is therefore the Austria-Italy contrast together with the necessity signals: relative self-employment propensity tracks the openness of wage employment, not the general business climate, once the native baseline is taken into account. H2 is thus supported, while any reading based on immigrant self-employment shares alone is qualified, and the Hungarian ratio is left open pending better data.

Table 2

Relative indicators of immigrant economic participation, 2024

Country	Employment-rate gap ΔER	Unemployment-rate gap ΔUR	Relative self-employment ratio RSE	Necessity signal
Austria	-7.1 pp (69% vs 76.1%)	+4.3 pp (9.6% vs 5.3%)	< 1 (slightly below native)	High exit from self-employment to unemployment
Italy	-4.0 pp (57.6% vs 61.6%)	+4.1 pp (10.2% vs 6.1%)	≈ 0.62 (12.9% vs 20.9%)	Anticyclical firm growth; over-qualification 60.2%
Hungary	≈ 0 (near parity)	low	n.a. (not reliably estimable)	Guest-worker majority; co-ethnic niche business

Source: authors' compilation from OECD (2024, 2025), ÖIF (2024) and Statistics Austria (2024) for Austria; Ministero del Lavoro (2025) and IDOS & CNA (2025) for Italy; OECD (2024, 2025), Menyhért (2025) and Bodor (2024) for Hungary. Hungarian figures are directional (Section 3.4).

4.3. Immigrant enterprise in the SME economy

Immigrant-owned businesses occupy very different weights in the three SME economies (Table 3). In Austria some 122,100 immigrant-owned firms make up about 7% of all SMEs, and the receptivity of the ecosystem is striking: the Public Employment Service reports that around 40% of participants in its start-up programme are foreign nationals, unique in the EU, while immigrant owners are progressively drawn into the Chamber system, raising formalisation (ÖIF, 2024). In Italy immigrant-owned firms number about 659,709 and account for roughly 17% of all businesses, overwhelmingly micro-enterprises built on a family model, which makes them a structural part of the SME sector. In Hungary immigrant-founded SMEs remain below 2%, reflecting a restrictive migration policy and limited institutional support for integration. These shares measure a different quantity from RSE - the immigrant footprint in the whole business stock rather than the propensity relative to natives - and the two are complementary: Italy combines a large immigrant

business footprint with a below-native propensity, precisely because its native self-employment baseline is exceptionally high.

Table 3

Immigrant-owned businesses in the SME stock, 2024

Country	Foreign residents	Foreign share of population	Immigrant-owned SMEs	Share of all SMEs
Austria	1,891,184	20.6%	122,100	~7%
Hungary	250,912	2.6%	13,900	< 2%
Italy	5,000,000	8.5%	659,709	~17%

Source: authors' compilation from Eurostat (2024), OECD (2024, 2025) and ÖIF (2024). Hungarian figures are estimates (Section 3.4).

4.4. Qualitative findings: three resilience regimes and ecosystem receptivity

The thematic analysis of the thirty interviews fills these macro patterns with mechanism-level detail and yields, as its central contribution, three culturally and institutionally distinct resilience types, summarised in Table 4. Austrian owners display an institutional-professional resilience: they plan proactively and lean on state and chamber institutions, treating the Economic Chamber and the Public Employment Service as partners and using free chamber training, including in cybersecurity. Hungarian owners display an adaptive-improvisational resilience: they respond reactively and creatively from within family resources, perceive the state as absent rather than supportive, and plan little - none of the ten held a formalised succession plan. Italian owners, especially in the South, display a community-emotional resilience built on local solidarity and a “tirare avanti” (carrying-on) ethos, in a setting where the state is experienced as an obstacle rather than a partner and where infrastructural neglect is a lived reality, captured by one Southern interviewee’s account of going “three days without water.”

Labour and human capital recur as the binding constraint in all three, but with national inflections. Hungarian hospitality owners describe an acute shortage sharpened by emigration and by a generational shift in work values: “You can still find a cook, but a good one is expensive - a really good one earns several thousand euros a month abroad, and you have to compete with that” (H5), while late-night and weekend schedules “do not fit young people’s values” (H4). Rural infrastructure compounds the constraint, as unreliable public transport and low pay make commuting unviable for older workers (H7). Austrian owners report a heavy and matter-of-fact reliance on foreign workers, and Italian owners a seasonal shortage alongside a high share of lower-skilled immigrant labour, especially in agriculture and care.

The most direct bridge to immigrant entrepreneurship is the composition of the Austrian sample itself: seven of ten Viennese interviewees are first-generation immigrants, against one of ten in Hungary and Italy. This is not a representative statistic but a signal, consistent with the macro indicators and with the Public Employment Service’s start-up figures, that the Austrian ecosystem absorbs and retains immigrant entrepreneurs to a degree the other two do not. The qualitative and quantitative layers thus converge: the wage-employment-led, institutionally dense Austrian regime is also the most open to immigrant enterprise; the Hungarian regime, low in immigration and institutional support, records the thinnest immigrant business presence; and the Italian regime combines a large immigrant business footprint with a necessity-inflected, community-embedded resilience.

Table 4

Three entrepreneurial realities: comparative thematic synthesis

Dimension	Hungary	Austria	Italy
Entrepreneurial mentality	Overloaded “specialist” in survival mode; low growth ambition	Proactive, planning “manager”; high adaptability	Persistent “survivor”; state neglect, strong community cohesion
Perceived institutional support	Neglect; little effective help expected	Strong partnership (Chamber, employment service, free training)	Largely absent in the South; state as obstacle
Labour-market challenge	Shortage of reliable staff, acute in hospitality	Evening/weekend shortage; high reliance on foreign workers	Seasonal shortage; large lower-skilled immigrant workforce
Resilience type	Adaptive-improvisational	Institutional-professional	Community-emotional (“tirare avanti”)

Source: authors’ thematic synthesis of thirty mother-tongue interviews (2024-2025).

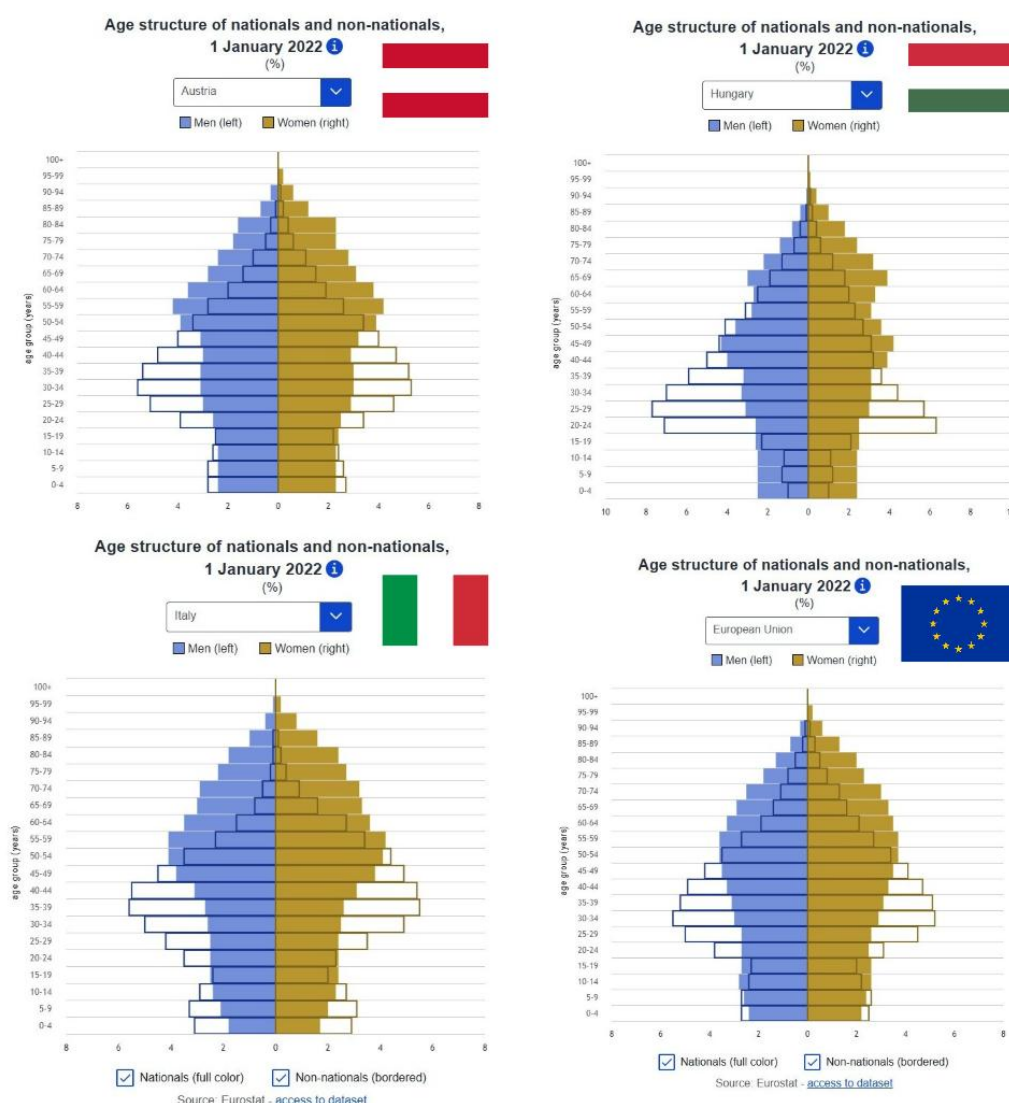


Figure 1. Age structure of nationals and non-nationals, 1 January 2022 (upper left: Austria; upper right: Hungary; lower left: Italy; lower right: EU average)

Source: Eurostat.

5. DISCUSSION

The empirical findings align closely with the mixed-embeddedness framework (Kloosterman et al., 1999; Kloosterman & Rath, 2001): they demonstrate that immigrant business formation cannot be separated from the host opportunity structure or from blocked wage employment. Expressed through the relative self-employment ratio, the cases confirm this account once outcomes are measured relative to natives - Italy's below-parity ratio combined with anticyclical, niche-concentrated growth fits the necessity mechanism, while Austria's below-parity propensity accompanies the most open wage-employment channel; Hungary, whose ratio cannot be reliably estimated, pairs a wage-employed guest-worker majority with a small settled community in which entrepreneurship concentrates. The primary interviews add the mechanism the macro data cannot show: the Austrian ecosystem's institutional density is not merely a policy inventory but a lived partnership that draws immigrant entrepreneurs into the formal economy, whereas the Hungarian and Southern-Italian ecosystems are experienced as absent, pushing enterprise back onto family and community resources. Whitley's (1999) national-business-systems logic and Isenberg's (2010) ecosystem domains together account for why the same mixed-embeddedness mechanisms produce three regimes rather than one.

The findings refine the North-South typology of Baycan-Levent and Nijkamp (2009). The expectation that Southern-European conditions stimulate migrant self-employment is borne out by Italy's anticyclical firm growth; but the immigrant-to-native ratio there is below one, because the Italian native self-employment rate is exceptionally high, so the North-South distinction holds for the necessity dynamic yet not for the raw ratio. The Italian interviews sharpen this further by exposing an internal North-South divide (Petraglia & Prezioso, 2023), in which Southern owners face infrastructural neglect and rely on community-emotional resilience - a within-case heterogeneity invisible to national aggregates. The three-country resilience typology - institutional-professional, adaptive-improvisational and community-emotional - extends the SME-resilience literature (Herbane, 2010; Bhamra et al., 2011) by giving it an explicit cultural and institutional dimension, and connects to the socioemotional-wealth account (Gómez-Mejía et al., 2007), since the Hungarian rejection of external capital and the Southern-Italian identification of firm with family are recognisably control- and identity-preserving choices.

On integration outcomes, the sectoral results confirm dual-labour-market theory (Piore, 1980) and the language mechanism of D'Amuri and Peri (2014): non-EU workers concentrate in the secondary segment in all three countries, and the Austrian language-employment gradient gives a concrete illustration of the macro relationships established by Adsera and Pytliková (2015) and Belot and Ederveen (2012). The Italian over-qualification evidence qualifies optimistic readings of high employment counts, exactly as economic-assimilation accounts imply (Horn & Kónya, 2016), and the multifocal reading of Solano et al. (2022) is echoed in the Hungarian case, where entrepreneurial propensity is carried by cross-border Chinese and Vietnamese communities. The Hungarian findings update Cseh Papp et al. (2019) on the territorial concentration of foreign employment, while the intercontinental flows into Central and Eastern Europe anticipated by Bite et al. (2020) and Smallbone et al. (2017) are visible in the Asian inflows documented here. Taken together, the comparison does not overturn the established literature; it quantifies the opportunity-necessity distinction, corrects it for the native baseline, and grounds it in primary, mother-tongue evidence across three previously uncomparated cases.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper compared immigrant labour-market integration and entrepreneurship in Austria, Italy and Hungary through an exploratory, mixed-methods comparative design, deriving its hypotheses from the literature and confronting them with both macro relative indicators and thirty original mother-tongue

interviews. The three cases correspond to three institutionally distinct regimes, supporting H1: a wage-employment-led regime in Austria, where a large immigrant population is absorbed mainly into dependent employment under a dense support architecture that is also markedly open to immigrant enterprise; a large-workforce regime in Italy, where labour-market closure, high over-qualification and an internal North-South divide coincide with anticyclical, community-embedded immigrant enterprise; and a small, recently opened, transnational regime in Hungary, where very high employment coexists with rudimentary integration and with entrepreneurship carried by co-ethnic niches.

H2 is supported in a qualified form: immigrants' relative self-employment propensity and its necessity character track the openness of wage employment rather than the general business climate, but only once outcomes are benchmarked against natives, since the immigrant self-employment share alone is misleading, as the Italian case shows; the clearest evidence is the Austria-Italy contrast, while the Hungarian ratio remains indeterminate for want of data. H3 is supported: the denser Austrian architecture of language provision, qualification recognition and equal-terms enterprise support coincides with the greatest openness to immigrant entrepreneurs, even though the immigrant-native employment gap there remains sizeable, reflecting the scale and diversity of Austria's immigrant population; its instruments are selectively transferable, conditional on administrative capacity and on a political framing of immigration as an economic and demographic opportunity - conditions only partially met in Hungary and unevenly across Italy.

Four contributions follow. Substantively, the paper offers the first integrated mixed-methods comparison of these three cases. Methodologically, it specifies a transferable, formally defined framework of relative, native-benchmarked indicators (RSE, ΔER , ΔUR and sectoral over-representation), read jointly with necessity signals, that makes countries with very different self-employment baselines genuinely comparable. Empirically, it derives from primary mother-tongue evidence a typology of three resilience regimes - institutional-professional, adaptive-improvisational and community-emotional - linking institutional configuration to entrepreneurial behaviour. Theoretically, it refines the necessity-opportunity distinction by separating the necessity dynamic from the raw self-employment ratio. For policy, the implications are regime-specific: Austria would consolidate an effective system by sustaining qualification recognition and expanding finance and mentoring for immigrant entrepreneurs; Italy would convert necessity enterprise into more durable activity by simplifying formalisation, easing access to credit and addressing the Southern infrastructure gap; and Hungary would broaden participation by building language provision, dedicated enterprise support and a proper statistical record of immigrant business. In each case integration is most effective when language, qualification recognition, labour-market access and enterprise support are treated as one connected system.

The limitations are those of a purposive, case-based mixed-methods design, stated in Section 3.4, and they define the agenda directly. The priority is individual-level estimation on harmonised microdata - for example the EU Labour Force Survey scientific-use files - which would allow the relative propensities reported here to be estimated with controls and their necessity character tested causally. Closing the Hungarian statistical gap on immigrant entrepreneurship is a precondition for fully comparable work, and extending the resilience typology to larger, representative samples and to the transnational organisation of immigrant business (Solano et al., 2022) is a natural next step.

FUNDING AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Funding: The authors received no specific external funding for this research.

AI acknowledgment: Generative AI tools were used to support language refinement, structural editing and the identification of recent literature. All academic content, data, citations and interpretations were created and verified by the authors.

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