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8 Challenges, Opportunities and Practical Recommendations from the Countries Studied

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8. Challenges, Opportunities and Practical Recommendations from the Countries Studied

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Integration policies in Europe diverge and converge in different aspects (Avcı 2006), and this is also true in the case of our four focus countries: the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Germany and Belgium.¹ Nevertheless, these four countries share a number of similar challenges and opportunities. In the first part of this chapter, we thus focus on the challenges that the authors of the previous chapters currently (2021) perceive as critical in their countries, with the caveat that some challenges are specific to particular country situations and others cut across the experiences of multiple countries. In the second part, we introduce shared recommendations, which stem mainly from the experiences of the authors and their organisations.

This chapter is based on correspondence and interviews with civil society representatives, academia, migrant associations and municipalities. In our debates on the integration policies adopted in each country, we have touched on which approaches are more and less successful, and we have to some extent sought answers as to why this is the case. Understanding why a particular practice works well (or does not work) is crucial for assessing its possible transferability. It is clear that approaches to migrant integration are substantially linked to the conception of other public policies and indeed to the values anchoring public policies in the given country.

For example, many practices related to migrant integration in Belgium stem from the country's emphasis on the participative approach, i.e. talking with residents rather than talking about them. Although the

1 In Belgium integration is a regional, rather than national, competence, so references to Belgium in the text refer to the regional level.

Czech Republic and Slovakia have begun to emphasise participation at the local level in recent years, political and administrative institutions still take a very ambivalent attitude towards the participation of the general public and other actors in decision-making (cf. Mička 2016). This is not to say that the participative approach is necessarily widespread in all Belgian municipalities, but rather that a country's experience with participatory policies, along with its social and political traditions, shapes the necessary breeding ground for the promotion of particular policies or policy tools. Also, this does not imply that Czech and Slovak cities should abandon the idea of involving migrants in public decision-making. However, it does mean that it may be more difficult to enforce such mechanisms in these countries, and that it might be worth considering other options that are more compatible with the traditions and contexts of the countries concerned.

Similarly, the Integration and Migration Councils in Bavaria have become established bodies that German local politicians mostly accept despite a number of practical challenges. However, their existence is conditional (among many other circumstances) on the fact that migrants need to be involved in local affairs and that it is good for local communities to take their voices into account. Without this pre-understanding, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to enforce such measures. Nevertheless, even inspiring practices that are not easy to transfer may serve as desirable visions, or such practices can be transferred once the necessary conditions are met in a particular setting.

Let us add that while we have tried to achieve as balanced a view as possible with regard to what is working well and what is not in the area of migrant integration, the selection of specific challenges and opportunities described here may in part naturally reflect the work experience and individual perspectives of the authors.

8.1 Identified challenges and opportunities

The different contexts do not change the fact that many of the challenges and opportunities in the field of integration policies remain the same. Turning now to the challenges and opportunities on which the representatives of the studied countries agreed at a national level, the following were mentioned in particular:

- Clear and effective distribution of legislative competencies and administrative tasks to different actors at the federal, state and local gov-

ernment levels. A failure to distribute competencies clearly can lead to parallel and overlapping responsibilities, which make it difficult to bundle integration policy measures effectively or may result in a lack of ownership of the necessary measures and their implementation.

- Regularly updated strategic documents, with sufficient mechanisms to ensure and monitor their implementation and with due attention to impact measurement.
- Availability of data and good data handling to enable evaluation of the policies and measures implemented, or lack thereof.
- Recognition and promotion of the importance of migrant and civil society participation in decision-making processes for the successful shaping of integration policy.

Despite the agreement on these key points of setting a functional integration policy at the national level, what the representatives of each country view as the key aspects within these points differs. For the Czech Republic and Slovakia, the key issue at the moment (2021) is the implementation and evaluation of policies and acceptance of the integration agenda by the state bodies responsible for it. In the context of Slovakia, the formal and administrative anchoring of the integration agenda is still a key focus point. In particular, it was mentioned that the meaning of the term “successful integration” remains rather blurred and needs to be clarified (e.g. through unified and codified criteria for Slovak language learning and the knowledge of Slovak values, life and institutions necessary for obtaining Slovak citizenship). In contrast, as far as Germany is concerned, the current (2021) priority is the need for the integration paradigm to shift away from a purely administrative and paternalistic approach to dealing with migrants to an integration policy that engages migrants and their organisations as actors and subjects in shaping integration processes. In Belgium, the key challenge currently (2021) lies in making other policy domains (housing, work, education, youth, culture, sports...) accountable for integration. This means that other domains should also provide budget/resources and formulate objectives with regard to migrants. To this end, a transversal integration policy needs to be implemented across different policy areas.

It is certainly worth noting that there are far greater similarities between the opportunities and challenges identified at the national (or perhaps general) level in the countries studied than between those identified at the regional and local levels.

In terms of regional and local policies, all four countries emphasised a current lack of motivation within regional governments and (many)

municipalities to address the issue of migrant integration. Nevertheless, this lack is different in each particular context. The only similarities are between the Czech Republic and Slovakia, both of which highlighted the need for both regions and municipalities to become more involved in integration, and to involve local actors (including universities and employers) to a far greater extent. This involves opening up the topic of migrant integration with individual municipalities, which often avoid the topic since international migration is often perceived as a negatively polarising issue, and migrants' contribution to society is not emphasised. From the German perspective, on the other hand, municipalities are already integrally involved; nevertheless, without systematic support in terms of resources from the federal states and constant exchange with local migrant communities, municipalities' participation in integration policies risks being marginal and unsuccessful. From the Belgian perspective, there is a pressing need for regional governments to take a cross-cutting approach on specific topics (e.g. the intersection of LGBTQI issues & migration, language policy & multilingualism).

Furthermore, there are significant challenges to the local integration of migrants in all four countries studied that are not intrinsic to the national, regional or local level. Two such challenges in particular have been identified as key obstacles to successful integration.

The first of these concerns the rhetoric towards migrants and/or the rhetoric on migration in general: fear-mongering, promotion of hate speech, polarisation and us versus them rhetoric. This gives rise to the need for responses that do not fuel polarisation, which is far from easy, particularly in view of the recent flood of fake news.

The second widely mentioned shared issue related to migrant integration is the political participation of migrants and/or citizens of foreign origin/with migration backgrounds. In this respect, civil society actors in the Czech Republic and Germany have long been trying in vain to secure the right to vote in local elections for foreigners from non-EU countries who hold permanent residence. In both countries, this is a key right that migrants are not granted, which often results in them not being a population of interest to local politicians. In Slovakia and Belgium, migrants with permanent residence have the right to vote locally. Despite this, in Slovakia, permanently resident migrants are still not a population addressed by politicians (which, apart from the negative rhetoric about migration, may also be due to their low numbers). In Belgium, low levels of political engagement among Belgians with migrant backgrounds remain an important issue.

8.2 Shared recommendations

Just as there are differences and similarities between the four countries described in terms of the challenges they face, there are also differences and similarities in terms of the recommendations to be made.

The key common recommendation is that **migrant integration needs systematic support at national, regional and local levels**. This support should include not only a strategic grasp and functional implementation mechanisms, as mentioned above, but also stable financial support complemented by administrative and structural support for the agenda at various levels of government. Furthermore, this recommendation concerns the provision of mechanisms/tools to enable migrants to participate in decision-making processes so that their well-identified specific needs are reflected in the measures taken.

The shared recommendations then also relate to migrant integration governance. In this area, a particular need for the following measures was voiced:

- sufficient administrative capacity to deal with the migrant integration agenda (mainly at the local level);
- support to strengthen migrant associations;
- consideration and recognition of the role played by local and national governments;
- consideration of new, specific or intersectional topics related to integration in (local) policies (e.g. integration of migrants in rural areas);
- regular meetings of local networks/committees etc. dealing with the topic, which should not be only informative but should also contribute to addressing emerging challenges through concrete proposals (e.g. aiming to shape local policies);
- involvement of migrants, migrants' self-organisations and other migrant groups in discussions about local integration measures and/or in drafting integration strategies or related documents;
- from a governance perspective, consideration of integration at a strategic level (e.g. mayor's bureau), especially as the topic is highly transversal
- accountability/ownership at both political and administrative levels for integration agenda/policy.

The following set of recommendations relates to the practicalities of dealing with the migrant integration agenda at the local authority level. These measures call for:

- time, trust and patience in the process of establishing mutual coexistence and adaptation;
- administrative workers to be taught greater intercultural sensitivity as a key to understanding migrants' situations;
- a personal approach and space to meet and communicate;
- investment in people and organisations on the ground;
- impact monitoring that is not merely quantitative – personal stories often provide the clearest picture of the change achieved;
- invisible processes to be made visible. This involves substantially increasing communication on a variety of topics related to migrant integration (within the authorities and outside the authorities, among the community, towards migrants, etc.).

Let us conclude this chapter by adding that the recommendations mentioned here naturally respond to the challenges described above, addressing for example migrants' political rights, political and civic participation, and responses to negative rhetoric towards migration.

8.3 Conclusion

One of this publication's aims was to outline the local integration policy setting in the four selected countries. In describing the hierarchical structures of national anchoring and the roles played by regions and by local authorities, we set out to understand the policy setting and approaches taken to migrants in each of the focus countries. We have also pointed out each country's strengths along with the individual and shared weaknesses of the policies described. Comparisons of public policies tend to be very useful, but it is almost impossible when making them to avoid simplification and various blind spots (Wenzelburger and Jensen 2022).

We hope that this publication will serve as a springboard for further explorations of questions the scope of this publication did not provide room for, or which we touched on only briefly. These might explore, among other things, why integration policies and measures are set as they are; on what basis the given country judges integration success and what data (if any) it works with to do so; what the impacts of the setting and implementation of these policies are for migrants' everyday lives; and a deeper understanding of how countries behave towards specific groups of migrants, such as Ukrainian refugees.

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