

Refugee Integration in Europe: good practices and challenges

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The EU has a duty to protect refugees from exploitation, while preserving the values upon Europe's democratic societies are built, argues Tommaso Virgili.



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Over the last four years, unprecedented numbers of refugees and asylum seekers have arrived in Europe. This massive movement of people has caught many EU member state governments unprepared from several points of view.

In order to understand how member states are managing the integration process, the European Foundation for Democracy undertook a survey in seven countries; Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden.

An innovative aspect of this study is that, of the 245 interviews we conducted, 131 were with refugees and asylum seekers themselves: the survey is thereby informed by their stories, fears and expectations.

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The aim of the research was to identify good and bad practices related to three main pillars of integration; cultural, economic and inclusion.

The first pillar is socio-cultural integration based on liberal-democratic values, as enshrined in the European Convention on Human Rights, the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, and national constitutional traditions.

The second pillar is socio-economic, i.e. access to the labour market, housing and basic welfare while the final pillar focusses on social inclusion such as coexistence with host societies, the protection of refugees from discrimination, racism and xenophobia.

Our background premise was that European states have a duty to protect both the newcomers and the host society ensuring a harmonious coexistence, regardless of how long refugees remain in Europe.

In order to achieve this objective, positive exchanges of good integration practices are key, as are addressing malpractices that are not effective towards achieving integration, or that take into consideration only certain aspects.

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That is why, on the basis of our findings, we have added concrete recommendations for European policymakers at different levels.

Our survey identified several good practices in all the countries and under all three pillars analysed, both at government and civil society levels.

On the other hand, problematic aspects also emerged. In general, the focus of integration activities in Europe seems to be disproportionately placed on the labour market and practical aspects of daily life, at the expense of activities involving the host community, as well as educating newcomers on the values of liberal-democratic societies.

Our research found that, although overt acts of racism are often unreported as a frequent occurrence, a widespread sense of mistrust and prejudice against refugees seems to exist. As this is mainly attributed to fear and ignorance about refugees and their situation, any activity bringing together the latter with host communities should be encouraged and replicated more broadly.

Integration into the liberal-democratic societal framework is necessary in order to guarantee that, regardless of origin, each and every person's individual rights are respected, including those that may be particularly controversial such as freedom of conscience and religious or non-religious beliefs, gender equality and sexual orientation.

"We have a duty to protect refugees from exploitation, while preserving the values upon which our liberal democratic societies are built"

Such measures should be seen as primarily aimed at protecting newcomers, who admitted during our interviews that they often felt harassed by their peers, who they say feel entitled to impose on them what they deem their authentic culture of origin.

From this point of view, we support and encourage those initiatives focusing on liberal democratic values where trainers come from the same cultural background of the newcomers and speak their language, thereby acting as a bridge between different values-systems.

In order to foster meaningful integration into the host society, governments should also take measures to avoid the creation of ghettos. In areas with high concentrations of immigrants and refugees, problems of cohabitation, greater difficulty in learning the language and adapting to the local context, as well as severe stress placed on social services were reported to us.

Finally, it is crucial that organisations involved in refugee integration are mapped and their activities monitored. This would respond to two different issues emerged from our research.

Asylum seekers and refugees often complained about the difficulty in navigating complex systems, with multiple service providers and competent integration offices in the absence of a holistic, coordinated structure.

Second, they are vulnerable people, easy prey of organisations and individuals having an interest in exploiting their needs and fragile state for ulterior motives, not always legal or transparent.

We have a duty to protect refugees from exploitation, while preserving the values upon which our liberal democratic societies are built.

Download the European Foundation for Democracy [Refugees in Europe - Review of integration practices & policies](#) [7] survey report.

About the author

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