

# NEW IN EUROPE: REPORT

**Integration policy should focus on language, work, education and the rule of law, not on identity. Integration programs should be free and open to non-newcomers so that all residents can benefit from a literacy class or employment guidance.**

These were some of the main conclusions of the Ralf Dahrendorf Roundtable 'New in Europe', organised by the Mr. Hans van Mierlo Foundation in cooperation with the European Liberal Forum (ELF) on Monday March 20<sup>th</sup>, 2017. Bringing together immigration and integration experts from different European countries, the roundtable specifically aimed at answering two questions: what to expect from newcomers and what responsibilities should the government have in facilitating newcomers' integration into society?



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The Van Mierlo Foundation invited ELF members to send integration experts from their respective countries to discuss these questions. Panelists were Rainer Adam (Friedrich Naumann Foundation, Germany/Bulgaria), Patrick Joyce (FORES, Sweden), Murat Erdoğan (Friedrich Naumann Foundation, Turkey), Myriam Parys (Studiecentrum Open VLD, Flanders/Belgium) and Marthe Hesselmans (Van Mierlo Foundation, The Netherlands). D66-senator Petra Stienen moderated the discussion. Throughout the discussion the following key recommendations and challenges emerged:

Recommendations	Challenges
1. Focus integration policy on fundamentals of language, work, education and the rule of law and not on cultural and identity aspects.	1. Integration policy is but one piece of the puzzle and is dependent of other social and economic factors. E.g. for newcomers' labor participation there also need to be jobs available.
2. Invest in free integration programs with incentives to participate and withdrawal of benefits in case of noncompliance – but not with fines. Invest especially in employment guidance and place newcomers in regions with job opportunities that match their employment history.	2. European countries differ greatly in the priority they give to and the experience they have with integration. Especially eastern European countries were until recently emigration rather than immigration countries and often lack any coherent integration policy.
3. Make integration programs available for other residents so that a broader group of people can benefit from e.g. language programs or employment guidance.	3. Integration programs solely focused on newcomers run the risk of undermining public support for the newcomers, which in turn undermines their integration.

## Expectations

What do different countries expect from newcomers? Participants agreed that finding work or education and learning the language should make up the fundamentals of any constructive integration policy. In Flanders (northern Belgium), newcomers are expected to learn the language, find work, education or do voluntary work, as well as follow courses in 'citizenship', where they learn about democracy and the rule of law in a pluralist society. Broadly speaking, Sweden and the Netherlands expect the same.

However, over the past years, Dutch integration policy changed its focus towards more cultural aspects. Its integration exam specifically tests newcomers on their knowledge of Dutch norms, values and customs. In Flanders, cultural integration was also much debated but led to a rather different outcome. It was consciously decided in 2014 not to take a cultural approach and to steer away from identity questions in the integration program. For Flanders, the main question should be "what is



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needed to live together peacefully?" instead of "what makes up the Flemish identity?" The citizenship course therefore involves knowledge of the constitution and democracy, but not of specific Flemish traditions. In Sweden there has also been a public discussion about the need for newcomers to learn and adapt to "Swedish values" but the integration policy has managed to stay focused on the fundamental priorities for the newcomers; learning the language and finding work.

## Responsibilities

We can have expectations of newcomers to be or become as quickly as possible self-sufficient law-abiding citizens. But what is needed to make sure that newcomers can in fact meet these expectations? And to what extent is this the responsibility of the newcomer him or herself and/or local or national authorities, or rather the broader society?

In the Netherlands, integration is, at the moment, primarily the responsibility of newcomers. The Netherlands compels newcomers to pass an integration exam within three years upon receiving a temporary permit. The exam tests minimum language skills, knowledge of Dutch norms and values and, since recently, orientation on the labour market. Newcomers have to find and pay for a course to prepare for the exam themselves. The courses are privatized, but the government does offer loans to finance the course. These can be turned into a gift for asylum migrants (not other migrants) if they pass the exam on time. At this time, barely 30% passes within the set period of three years. Even when they pass, their language skills and perspectives on the labor market remain limited. Newcomers thus face high expectations, but receive relatively little (government) support in their integration process.

Sweden and Flanders show an alternative view. Both countries consider integration policy an important investment. They offer extensive (central) government funded integration programs for free to all newcomers. Sweden, for example, offers individual introductory plans that have strong ties to the labour market. The Ministry of Employment offers newcomers guidance for a period of 2 years in finding work, internships, or a suitable education. This includes traineeships that give newcomers the opportunity of simultaneously working and learning Swedish. Separate language courses based on a syllabus developed by the Ministry of Education are compulsory as well. Flanders has a somewhat similar system. Integration programs are paid for by the regional government. They are however

organised by local agencies. The classes in citizenship are offered in the mother tongue to make sure the relevant information and knowledge of Flemish society is obtained before, not after, language courses.

Challenges remain. In Sweden, despite the extensive employment program, newcomers still struggle to find work in the Swedish high-skilled labour market. In Belgium it must be noted that there is not one consistent integration policy. Whereas in the region of Flanders integration programs are extensive and mandatory, the southern region of Wallonia takes a more minimalistic and laissez-faire approach to integration.

### **Broadening the definition of “newcomer”?**

During the discussion, the question was raised whether integration should be a policy specifically aimed at newcomers, or whether a more general policy on work, education and housing for *all* – newcomers and citizens – would be a more fruitful approach. Could we expand integration programs in order to make them beneficial for the general population. In other words: can we broaden the definition of newcomers?

This is related to the question of a ‘double standard policy’: should newcomers be given a preferential treatment? In Sweden for example, newcomers get preferential treatment when it comes to housing since their needs are more urgent. That has led to discontent among other Swedes, especially the young, who also struggle to find affordable rentals. The solution has to be to provide more new housing for everyone.

The question whether integration should be a policy specifically aimed at newcomers also has to do with placing social problems in a broader perspective. Often, policy that is too narrowly focused on specific groups creates new problems. It contributes to the stigmatization of certain groups and fails to involve other people who might also benefit from certain integration programs such as literacy classes or employment guidance.

### **In a different perspective**

Turkey and Bulgaria show that integration policy is greatly dependent on basic social and economic conditions. This counts for the perspective on work and as well as whether people are expected to stay or leave as soon as possible.

Integration policy is very limited in Turkey. The enormous amount of over 3,2 million refugees – 2,9 million from Syria – demand all attention. Refugees now make up to 3% of the total Turkish population. Dealing with potential tensions among communities and with

the poor economic position of newcomers is generally considered more urgent than having a sound integration policy. Moreover, the level of unemployment in Turkey is high. The country needs a million extra jobs, making integration primarily a question of economics.

In Bulgaria, a comprehensive policy is absent because the expectation is that newcomers will not stay. An integration policy is hard to maintain politically, and as far as it exists, is aimed at the transition of newcomers to other countries. Any preferential treatment (for instance subsidies and aids) is seen as



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unduly favouring 'outsiders' at the expense of Bulgarian citizens. Bulgaria has adopted strict border controls and expects newcomers to leave as soon as possible. Mostly, Bulgaria looks to western European countries for solutions. Whether this head-in-the-sand-policy will prove to be sustainable for the future, is yet to be seen.

## Reality check

The roundtable proved that reality is often too complex to be fully encompassed by government policy. There is no blueprint for successfully integrating newcomers. Much depends on the national and local context. Government integration policy is important, yet only one part of the story. Apart from government, society plays an important role in making sure newcomers can make a good start. In the Netherlands for example, a vast number of volunteers has been engaging with showing newcomers around in society, helping them to learn the language and find a job.

Another reality check concerns the importance of European cooperation. All parties agreed on the need for an EU-wide approach in order to realise more solidarity and exchange between wealthier and less wealthy European countries. The roundtable showed however that different European countries know relatively little of each others policies. This is unfortunate, especially when one considers the similar challenges these countries are facing. All struggle with the arrival of newcomers who have to make a brand new start with their lives. All struggle with scepticism if not fear among host communities towards these newcomers. Having a sound integration policy that benefits both newcomers and host communities is of paramount importance to all. Integration policy might be a domestic affair, but should every country have to reinvent the wheel?



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It is time to look beyond borders. European cooperation means exchanging best practices, learning from each other's mistakes and successes and showing solidarity. For, in the end, the successful integration of newcomers in each specific country is in the interest of everyone.