

The role of the European Union in third-country immigrant integration

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Abstract

This paper investigates the effectiveness of current approach to third-country immigrant integration in Europe and assesses the potential for increased EU involvement in shaping integration strategies. Analysing disparities in immigrants' treatment and rights across EU member states, the paper reveals barriers to achieving successful integration and equal rights. The paper contemplates the complex interplay between integration, national sovereignty, and rising nationalism, necessitating careful consideration in any proposed EU intervention. Ultimately, the paper underscores the importance of a comprehensive two-way approach to integration, grounded in respect and empathy, highlighting the potential for EU involvement to address systemic challenges and foster a more inclusive European society.

Keywords: harmonisation, integration, immigration, role of the EU, third-country nationals.

Introduction

In recent decades, the majority of EU Member States have witnessed a rise in migration, with migrants from third countries accounting for approximately four percent of the overall EU population. As a result, the demographic composition of European societies is undergoing significant transformations, characterized by increasing diversity. These shifting dynamics present new challenges for social cohesion and necessitate responsive actions from governments to address public concerns and effectively manage the consequences of increased migration (Platt et al., 2022). An underlying motivation for European integration is economic prosperity and growth. The successful integration and inclusion of third-country nationals (TCNs) is an essential part of fostering social cohesion and a dynamic functioning economy and is therefore integral to the success of European integration (Klarenbeek, 2021).

The current approach to integration policies in the EU has resulted in disparities in the treatment and rights of immigrants across member states, leading to a trend of marginalization rather than genuine inclusion. Consequently, the current integration strategy fails to fully harness the economic potential of immigrants and falls short of achieving the EU's goal of ensuring equal rights throughout the Union. This can be seen as a detriment to both EU nationals and third-country nationals. The question of whether a more centralized approach led by EU institutions could address these challenges remains unanswered.

While harmonization could promote a more consistent and equitable approach, it must be balanced with the recognition of the sensitive nature of immigration and integration, which is closely intertwined with national sovereignty and increasingly

affected by rising nationalism in Europe. Therefore, addressing the issue of integration may necessitate countering nationalist sentiments before further harmonization efforts can be pursued. Regardless of the governing bodies involved, research highlights the importance of a truly two-way approach to integration, grounded in mutual respect and empathy, rather than forced assimilation which has been used previously.

Part two will explore the theory and background of TCN integration in Europe. Part three will outline some of the outcomes that have occurred as a result of the current approaches to immigrant integration in Europe. Part four will examine examples of successful integration. Part five will consider whether EU institutions could play a greater role in the harmonisation of Europe's immigrant integration policy. Part six will conclude the essay by synthesising what has been discussed.

Background

What is integration?

The integration of immigrants refers to the multifaceted process by which individuals who have migrated to a new country become accepted and active participants in the social, economic, cultural, and political aspects of their host society. It encompasses the adaptation and incorporation of immigrants into the social fabric of the receiving country, fostering their equal opportunities, rights, and responsibilities. Integration involves not only the acquisition of language skills, education, and employment, but also the establishment of social networks, cultural understanding, and civic engagement. It is a reciprocal process that requires the active involvement and support of both immigrants and the receiving society to promote social cohesion, diversity, and the realization of shared values (Klarenbeek, 2021). The concept of integration recognizes the importance of inclusive societies that value the contributions and identities of all members, regardless of their ethnic, cultural, or national backgrounds (Bottero, 2023).

How is integration regulated in Europe?

The European Union (EU) was formed in the wake of World War II, in an effort to prevent further conflict in Europe, as an antidote to extreme nationalism, and out of a desire to integrate European economies to forge greater financial prosperity for those in the Union (Gilbert, 2011). From its foundations in the primary focus of economic integration, the EU has since expanded into other competencies. Although free movement of workers was one of the four freedoms the European Community was founded on in 1957, it was not until 1999 that the Treaty of Amsterdam brought immigration and other policies relating to the free movement of people and third-country nationals into the EU's competencies (*Treaty of Amsterdam Amending the Treaty on European Union, The Treaties Establishing the European Communities and Certain Related Acts*, 1997).

This expansion of competency includes guidelines, support, and funding to address the integration of third-country immigrants into EU member states (*Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (2021-2027)* n.d.; *European Social Fund Plus*, n.d.). These initiatives base the integration of third-country nationals on principles of non-discrimination, equality, and respect for fundamental rights. They encourage member

states to develop comprehensive integration strategies that cover various aspects of immigrants' lives such as language learning, education, employment, housing and social inclusion. The EU's action plan on integration and inclusion recognises the need for integration to be a two-way effort from the host community and the individual immigrant (European Commission, n.d.). This sentiment appears to be echoed by EU citizens; in a 2022 Eurobarometer, 70% of respondents agreed that integration is a two-way process and 69% agreed that actively promoting integration of immigrants is a necessary investment for their country in the long run (European Commission, 2023).

However, although the EU may provide incentives to promote member states aiding third-country nationals integration into the EU there is no harmonisation of national laws and regulations (Sandu, 2023). Therefore, specific policies and approaches to immigrant integration vary across member states, as each country has its own national legislation and practices in this area (Nyhlén & Lidén, 2022). This variability has, as would be anticipated, produced varied outcomes.

Is the current approach working?

A stark example of failed integration policy can be found in France. France has adopted an “assimilationist” model for integration. This model's ideology aims to promote a unified national identity based on French values and principles. It emphasizes the importance of immigrants adopting the French language, culture, and values as a means of integration (Marlière, 2023).

An outcome of this policy could be found in the French “banlieues”, a word for suburbs that is now used to refer to, and express contempt for, slums dominated by immigrants. Media often focus on reporting crime and violence and labelling them as “no go zones” (Harding, 2019). The stigma surrounding the banlieues is evidence of social segregation and abject conditions and the toleration rather than integration of migrants. These suburbs become concentration points for poverty and social isolation and are the subject of angry discussions in France (Packer, 2015).

Denmark is one of the few countries that is regarded to have had relative success with its integration policies. The domestic Danish government targeted three groups: asylum seekers and refugees, municipalities, and business. Part of Denmark's policies was to establish metrics to measure the degree of integration of immigrants and their children into the labour market and their ability to access state benefits (White, 2023).

Despite the narrative of success, Denmark's approach has not been rooted in the integration of immigrants but has largely been to restrict and deter immigrants and immigration. The government has placed limits on non-western immigrants, established a regime of expelling illegal migrants to North Africa, established full-time employment requirements, created a law allowing immigrants to be stripped of their jewellery on arrival and banned burqas and niqabs (Pipes, 2022). This approach may have positive outcomes for the economy of Denmark and the *need* to integrate immigrants but does not target the outcome of creating a more cohesive societal environment and cementing immigrants' contribution to the domestic economy. Instead, these policies are arguably more focused on immigration control rather than integration. Even the elements that could be categorised as integration arguably amount to forced assimilation, not two-way integration in any shape of form.

Overall, the outcomes for TCN immigrants in the EU suggests that the current approach to integration is not working. In 2022, a report comparing migrants in Italy and EU nationals found that migrants face greater exposure to poverty, vulnerability, and exploitation. The report also found that there were legislative obstacles for TCNs in accessing social benefits and that migrants are subject to marginalisation and subjugation (European Commission, 2022). In a 2023 survey, 47% of respondents stated they believe that integration is unsuccessful at the national level.

These examples clearly establish that the current approach is not working as it should. Despite the recognition that integration must be a two-way process by citizens and EU governance, the dominant approaches of integration in the EU appear to be to assimilate or segregate. Assimilation is a one-way change process which requires the incoming person to make all the adaptations to the existing norms, values, and behaviours of the host country (Omanović & Langley, 2023). This approach has the tendency to normalise the majority population's cultural life and experiences and simultaneously establish it as superior to other ways of life (Korteweg, 2017; Schinkel, 2018).

What does “good” integration look like?

Both ranked in the top five for immigrant integration globally in 2020, Sweden and Finland are often considered historically to have had relatively successful immigrant integration policies. They have taken a comprehensive and holistic approach to integration, aiming to encompass all aspects of immigrants' lives to promote their participation in society (Solano & Huddleston, 2020).

Sweden and Finland have promoted an inclusive and multicultural approach to integration, recognizing and valuing the diverse backgrounds and identities of immigrants. While they also have active labour market and language policies, their policies are aimed at supporting entry into the workforce, upskilling, and language education rather than forcing immigrants to meet certain criteria (Solano & Huddleston, 2020). Furthermore, both countries have well-developed social welfare systems that offer significant assistance and help alleviate socio-economic disparities.

These countries have also placed greater value on diversity of culture and experience. They encourage social cohesion by fostering respect for different cultures and promoting intercultural dialogue. They also actively engage civil society organizations and local communities in integration efforts, fostering collaboration and a sense of belonging (*Governance of Migrant Integration in Finland*, 2023; *Governance of Migrant Integration in Sweden*, 2023). This approach is in line with John Cassar White's belief that integration needs to cultivate shared identity to form a foundation of trust which is necessary for successful cooperation and coexistence among citizens (White, 2023).

Should EU institutions play a greater role in harmonising Europe's immigrant integration policy?

Whether the EU should play a greater role in immigrant integration is a difficult question to answer, and a determination either way likely depends on the decider's priorities. If they see immigration as potential a benefit to the economy, and value

equal opportunity and rights above all else, they would likely be in favour of further harmonisation. On the other hand, if they view immigration as a hinderance to their state and favour state sovereignty, they will likely oppose further harmonisation. Although TCNs can immigrate to the EU through a number of pathways, the tension around refugee immigrants dominates the discourse on immigrant integration.

Cultural composition and demographic outcomes are highly “personal” to each country and hugely sensitive to societal flux and public sentiment. A key example of this is Sweden’s pendulum swing from its aforementioned successes in integration. In 2022, the country saw riots in response to failures of immigrant integration which has led to the development of parallel societies (Henley, 2022). In response, the new right-wing conservative government coalition in Sweden aims to undo Sweden’s reputation for treating refugees with relative generosity by reforming immigration policy to deter immigrants (Ceisnik, 2023).

This swing was prompted by an increase in populist nationalism and anti-immigrant sentiment, a trend that has been observed throughout Europe following the pressure of the 2015 refugee crisis (Armstrong, 2019). The refugee crisis led to a huge influx of immigrants from majority Muslim countries. This influx, coupled with the increase in violent extremism in Europe, has led some EU states to become increasingly anti-immigration and islamophobic (Fortunato & Pecoraro, 2022; Perocco, 2018).

This rise in nationalism and the sensitivity of the subject of integration is likely to make prominent the view that further harmonisation of integration would be too great an imposition on state sovereignty and beyond the ambit of the EU’s jurisdiction. Furthermore, the presence of such polarised opinions on the matter would make reaching any consensus regarding a cohesive integration policy extremely difficult to achieve. Further limiting the ability to reach consensus is the fact that it is accepted that more research is needed to determine what effective integration policy looks like (Platt et al., 2022). Research suggests that what constitutes two-way integration has been insufficiently theorised and underdefined (Klarenbeek, 2021; Korteweg, 2017). Therefore, whether the EU should play a greater role would likely require further scientific analysis of integration policies to determine what approaches work.

Conclusion

Central to the purpose of European integration are the goals of maximising the economy of Europe and creating equal rights and opportunities for people across the EU. Immigration is a tool that can be used to enhance the economy by providing fortification to labour markets; this is optimised if immigrants are adequately integrated into their host country and become invested socially and economically in its society. The current approach to integration policy in the EU is creating disparities in the rights and treatment of immigrants between EU countries and trends toward immigrants being ostracised more so than integrated. Therefore, the current approach to integration of TCNs in the EU is not optimising TCNs’ potential as a stimulant of the economy and is not achieving the EU’s goal of affording equal rights across the member states. This is arguably a net loss to both EU nationals and TCNs.

Whether the answer to this problem lies in greater input from the EU’s institutions remains unanswered. On the one hand, harmonisation could create a more uniform approach achieving the goal of equal rights across the EU. On the other hand, the

integration of immigrants and immigration is a highly sensitive topic that involves the social climate of a state, something that is seen to be closely tied to state sovereignty. The latter consideration appears to be becoming more salient as nationalism rises in European countries. Therefore, any further harmonisation of integration policy may first need to see a new antidote to nationalism in Europe.

Regardless of the governmental bodies that mandate it, research shows that integration needs to be founded in a truly two-way approach. What this means in practice needs further attention but undeniably has a foundation in respect and empathy rather than the historical approach of forced conformity.

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