

How to foster social cohesion and positive attitudes towards the integration of migrants at the local level? Key challenges and policy options

Policy Brief

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy brief summarises the results of the Whole-COMM comparative report on **public opinions on the integration of refugees** from outside Europe and Ukraine to four European countries: Austria, Germany, Italy and Sweden. Based on a survey asked among long-term residents living in small and medium-size towns and rural areas (SMsTRA) and bigger cities in those four countries, the Whole-COMM comparative report concludes that: here are minor differences in opinions by size of municipality, opinions towards Ukrainians are more favourable, opinions are more favorable in Italy and less favourable in Austria, and perceptions of threat and daily contact in leisure activities are also associated to public opinions.

The policy brief also reports on **the key findings of a pilot integration policy index, MIPEX-L** based on the highest international normative standards on migrant integration. These indicators score and demonstrate local integration policies targeted to all Third Country Nationals, for the years 2022-23 on dimensions of governance system, monitoring mechanisms, stakeholder involvement as well as the key sectors of integration policy such as education, employment etc. The integration policy scores of the Whole-Comm municipalities are then analysed in relation to the typology of the localities selected by the project as well as the survey results sampled from these localities in an attempt to link attitudes and policies.

Based on these results concrete policy advice are proposed targeting national and local policy makers on:

- How to promote a more comprehensive idea of integration in SMsTRA.
- How to respond to the differences of opinions towards Ukrainians versus refugees from outside Europe.
- What to deduct from the differences in opinions among various receiving countries.



- How to create appropriate contexts to promote positive and meaningful inter-group contacts.
- How to achieve better integration policies based on MIPEX-L scores of the localities both at the local and national level.
- How to handle structural constraints.
- How to reflect on the linkages between integration policy frameworks and public attitudes on migration.

INTRODUCTION

After the outbreak of the Syrian war, Austria, Germany and Sweden became top destination countries for asylum seekers from Syria and other countries in the Middle East. At the same time, Italy also received a comparable number of asylum applications, mostly from people arriving by sea from Africa. These unprecedented number of arrivals caused a crisis in the reception systems of these and other European countries, which impacted public opinions as well migration and integration policies¹. Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, a significant shift in policies was brought about by the EU's Temporary Protection Directive in response to the mass displacement of Ukrainians throughout Europe. Despite the fact that in several EU countries, including Germany, the number of arrivals from Ukraine has already exceeded the number of asylum seekers from outside Europe in 2015-2016, this has not been labelled as a "refugee crisis". Furthermore, the predominant discourse among politicians has been based on solidarity and public opinions towards Ukrainians have been more favourable.

Attitudes toward migrants are reflected on public opinions on their integration and the other way around, perceptions on how well or how poorly a certain migrant nationality groups is doing in receiving countries – and therefore, to what extent they are contributing to the economy and society at large or becoming a burden – might also affect their attitude towards members of that group.

Whole-COMM analyses integration dynamics in SMsTRA based on the hypothesis that these are different in SMsTRA compared to bigger cities. Some of the factors behind potential differences between bigger and smaller municipalities are economic opportunities in the area, political orientation or previous experience with diversity. These might impact public opinions, which, in turn, will affect the behaviour of long-term, local residents and ultimately, their inter-relations between them and newcomers and their integration.

Based on the main findings of (i) a survey on public opinions on the integration of refugees from outside Europe and Ukrainians by people living in SMsTRA and bigger cities in Austria, Germany, Italy and Sweden, and (ii) the development of a MIPEX-L, a pilot index of local migrant integration studies, this policy brief reflects on the policy implications of such findings.

¹ In Sweden, for example, a temporary policy change was implemented in July 2016 that limited opportunities for permanent residency and family reunification among people who were granted international protection. In 2017 and 2019 two major reforms of the asylum procedure in Italy ended up in further restrictions in criteria to access the different forms of protection. In Austria, the 50 points plan on integration of beneficiaries of international protection and the Integration Act of 2017 introduced the obligation to participate in a number of integration courses for beneficiaries of international protection.

A questionnaire on public opinions on integration outcomes and policies was asked in the summer of 2023 among an equally distributed representative sample of 16,000 online panelists who were born or had been living in Austria, Germany, Italy or Sweden for ten years or more. Out of that number, 12,000 respondents lived in SMsTRA and 4,000 in bigger cities with a population of at least 250,000 people. The main findings of the survey are presented below.

a) Public opinions on integration

There are minor differences in opinions by size of municipality. Slightly more people living in SMsTRA think that migrants are responsible for their own integration whereas slightly less people living in SMsTRA think migrants, institutions and long-term residents are responsible for integration. More people living in cities perceive tension and hostility in the relationships between refugees from non-EU countries and long-term residents. We found no statistically significant differences in the likelihood of people considering refugees as being well integrated by type of municipality.

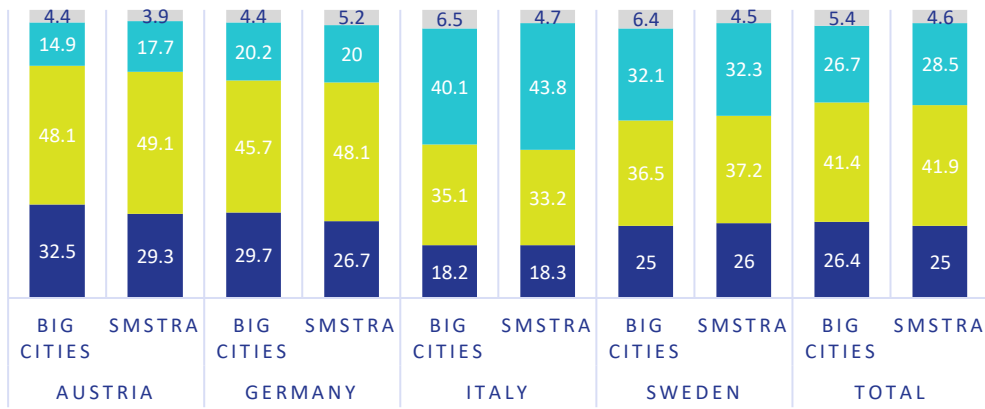
Opinions towards Ukrainians are more favourable. There are more people who think that Ukrainians are well-integrated than people who think non-European refugees are well-integrated. There are more people who think that there is tension and hostility in between long-term residents in their municipalities and non-European refugees than people who think there is tension with Ukrainians. On the contrary, there are more people who think relationships with Ukrainians are good than people who think relationships with non-Europeans are good. Furthermore, when asked about what integration policies should do, more people responded that Ukrainians should receive more support in the future compared to the current situation whereas less people have the same opinion about refugees from outside Europe.

Opinions are more favorable in Italy and less favourable in Austria. More people in Austria think that refugees only are responsible for their own integration, more people in Sweden believe it is a joint responsibility of refugees and institutions, more people in Germany considers refugees, institutions and other people are all responsible for integration, whereas opinions in Italy are quite balanced. There are more people in Italy (and Sweden) who believe that refugees, regardless their origin, are well-integrated than in Austria (and Germany) and *viceversa*. More people in Austria and Sweden think relationships with non-European refugees are hostile, while more people in Italy think they are good. Concerning relationships with Ukrainians, more people in Italy and Sweden think they are good and more people in Austria and Germany consider they are hostile.

Perceptions of threat and daily contact in leisure activities are also associated to public opinions. Respondents' perceptions that relationships between them – that is, between long-term residents – and refugees are hostile, that refugees increase crime and that they are a burden to the welfare state are negatively correlated to the probability of perceiving refugees as being well integrated. On the contrary, opinions about refugees being good for the economy and innovation are positively associated with the probability of perceiving refugees as being well integrated. Daily contact with refugees from outside Europe in sports and cultural activities – but not in other contexts – increases people's likelihood of considering refugees as well integrated.

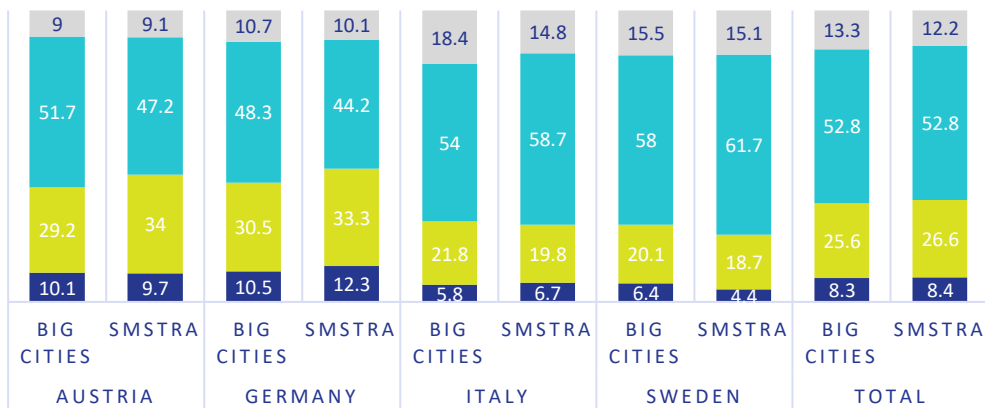
REFUGEES FROM OUTSIDE EUROPE ARE WELL INTEGRATED

■ Completely disagree ■ Somewhat disagree ■ Somewhat agree ■ Completely agree



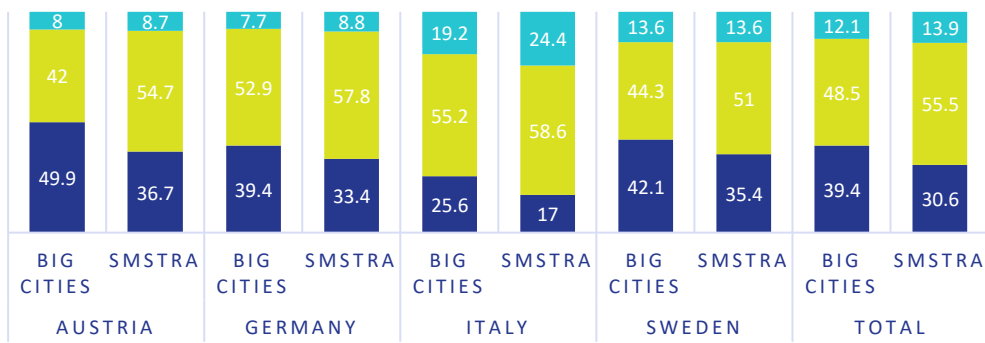
UKRAINIAN REFUGEES ARE WELL INTEGRATED

■ Completely disagree ■ Somewhat disagree ■ Somewhat agree ■ Completely agree



RELATIONSHIPS WITH REFUGEES FROM OUTSIDE EUROPE

■ Relationships are good and if there is a problem, people are able to solve it peacefully
 ■ There is almost no relationship but people respect each other and there is very little conflict
 ■ There is tension and hostility



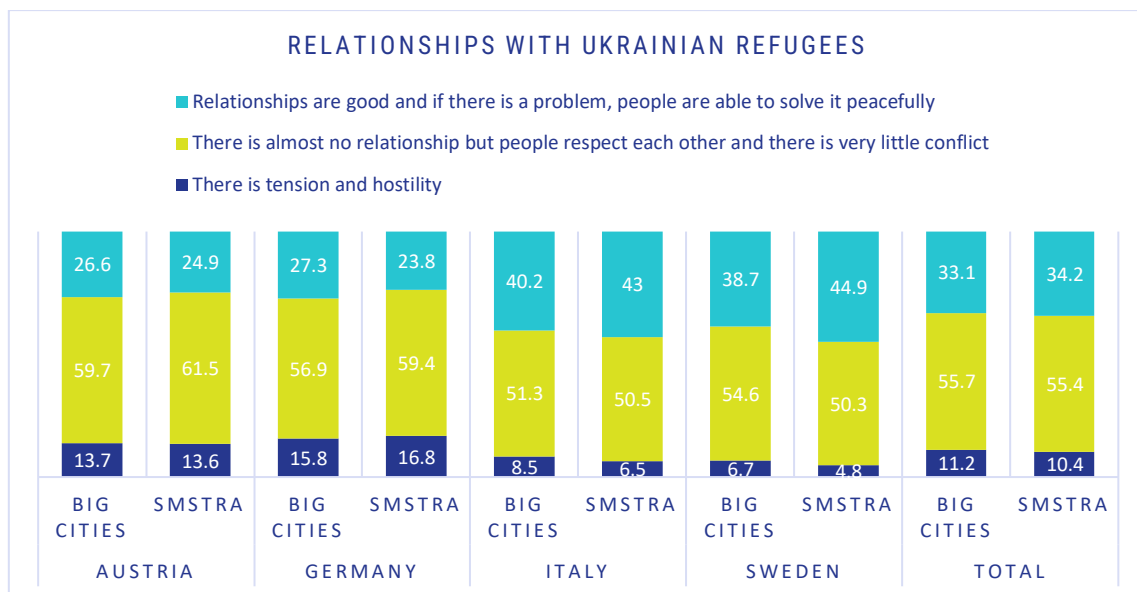


Figure 1. Public opinions on the integration of refugees and relationships between these and long-term residents and by size of municipality and country of residency

a) MIPEX-L

MIPEX-L introduces a comparative analytical tool that offers a specific and novel approach to compare local integration models following the local turn in migration studies, identify their strengths and weaknesses and highlight possible directions for improvement following MPG’s previous indicators from [MIPEX](#) and [MIPEX-R](#) indexes. The comparative analysis of piloted MIPEX-L focuses on the policies of migrant integration across small and medium sized municipalities in Whole-Comm Municipalities. The index helped analyse the performance of municipalities across several analytical dimensions to assess the level of development and efficacy of integration policies and practices.

To build the indicators on integration at local level, following the literature in the field (Pasetti et al. 2022, Solano and Huddleston 2020, Wolffhardt et al. 2019), MIPEX-L identifies the highest European and international normative standards on asylum and refugee, migrant integration, and human rights protection, including, EU Action Plan Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027 and UN Global Compact on Migration, 2019².

MIPEX-L aims to: i) provide evidence-based knowledge to foster migrant integration at the local level; ii) refine the use of indicators for integration-policy evaluation at the local level; iii) pinpoint the contribution of local actors in the integration process; iv) foster the capacity for mutual learning between localities in the EU and v) propose a unique tool for better exploration of the linkages between integration policy and outcomes.

As illustrated in Table 1, the MIPEX-L results offer an initial overview of integration policies and approaches from the perspective of **39 localities in six EU countries and Turkey**. The main evaluations have been carried out in relation to:

² For more on the specific methodology and benchmarking of MIPEX-R which inspired the current MIPEX L, refer to the methodology section in the [MIPEX-R Comparative Report](#).

Key findings

A. Integration policy areas

The contribution of the local level in the creation and implementation of effective migrant integration practices is widely recognised at academic and political level (Manatschal et al., 2020; Scholten and Penninx, 2016). Recently, the Commission's Action Plan on integration and inclusion point out that: "Integration happens in every village, city and region where migrants live, work and go to school or to a sports club [and] the local level plays a key role in welcoming and guiding newcomers when they first arrive in their new country" (EU Commission, 2020, p. 7). However, MIPEX-L indicators show that only a few municipalities have adopted a clear and comprehensive strategy of migrant integration with specific rationales, goals, scopes and targets. Those who succeed in this are also the ones scoring high on different policy dimensions of the index underlining the importance of setting clear strategies.

B. Stakeholders' involvement

The Action Plan underlines the importance of adopting a multi-stakeholder approach to policy-making for ensuring a better integration process: "integration is a societal process where the responsibility rests not with one particular group but rather with many: migrants, host communities, public authorities and institutions, social and economic partners, civil society organisations, churches, religious and other philosophical communities and the private sector" (EU Action Plan, p. 15). To this end, the European Commission emphasises the need of establishing long-term, multi-stakeholder and multi-level policy processes which include heterogeneous actors, especially migrant groups (Deodati & Conte, 2022). On this aspect, MIPEX-L shows that different stakeholders are involved in the decision-making process of the Whole-Comm municipalities, but strong consultative structures and specialised municipal bodies on integration-related measures are still missing in many localities.

C. Monitoring

MIPEX-L results also outline the lack of monitoring mechanisms in most of the municipalities. Except for the Dutch towns and some medium sized German, and Swedish municipalities, there is limited policy development in regularly and systematically monitoring policies and their impact on migrant populations.

D. Integration policies

MIPEX-L indicators point out that, when it comes to specific policy areas, municipalities are mostly engaged in promoting more favourable conditions and better access for migrants to language courses, healthcare, labor market and education. On the other hand, there is still very limited policy development regarding migrant political participation, intercultural communication and antidiscrimination. These policy dimensions are fundamental for the long-term integration of migrants and refugees in society, as acknowledged by multiple EU and international legal and policy documents.

E. Integration Scores and WHOLE-COMM typology

The analysis of the localities' migrant integration policy scores illustrates that policy frameworks are closely linked with experience diversity, structural development/material capabilities of the localities and political affiliations of elected localities. In particular, those municipalities with more favourable structural conditions in terms of their basic economic indicators such as income and employment levels are also those with higher scores on MIPEX-L, similarly rural ones have

considerably lower scores as compared to small and medium towns. When political constituencies are considered, municipalities governed by a conservative party are more likely to have low scores on migrant integration as compared to the others.

F. Integration Scores and Public Attitudes towards Migration

When the linkages between integration policies and public attitudes in the selected Whole-Comm localities are examined, a potential relationship between policies and public attitudes becomes visible. In particular, when the host community's perceptions regarding the actual integration outcome of the two groups, namely non-European refugees and Ukrainian refugees considered, as one moves from a municipality with a low migrant integration policy score to the high one, the average public perception of differential integration of these two migrant groups diminishes for this subset of sampled data. In other words, better integration policies seem to come with similar appraisal of integration outcomes for all migrant groups by the host community. Better integration policy scores seem also to be related to the perception that Non-European refugees are better integrated in general, in addition to less differences with Ukrainians. Similarly, as the integration score of the locality increases, respondents see less of a difference between Ukrainian and Non-EU refugees regarding their relations with the host communities. Regarding the desired direction of policy for supporting refugees both currently and in the future not only is there more agreement with supporting the refugees from Ukraine, be it current policy or future direction, but both are positively correlated with integration policy. Furthermore, as the localities have a more favorable migrant integration policies, the sample of those surveyed indicate higher agreement for the policies to support the non-EU refugees.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Below we present some policy implications and recommendations introduced by key findings:

a) Promoting a more comprehensive idea of integration in SMsTRA.

- Policy makers at the EU, national and local levels should organize campaigns and activities to promote a concept of integration in line with their understanding of it, as a two-way process or mutual learning and adaptation between newcomers and long-term residents.
- Further promoting the idea of integration as an opportunity for community building in local contexts is fundamental for building bridges between newcomers and long-term residents.
- Concrete actions such as the ones presented in section d below, calls for volunteers to work together around common interests such as cleaning days in certain areas of towns or neighbourhoods, etc. are needed to realize this idea.

b) Reflecting on the differences in opinions towards Ukrainians versus refugees from outside Europe.

- Policy makers at the EU and national levels should reflect on the reasons behind and outcomes of the different policies targeting Ukrainians versus refugees from

outside Europe promoted by them. This reflection should serve to inform future policies.

- Data collection on integration outcomes is of paramount importance to understand how newcomers – including Ukrainians and those with temporary permits – are doing in receiving countries, and to disseminate the right information. In countries like Sweden, for example, Ukrainians are not included in the population register and therefore, even basic information like employment rates is difficult to collect.
- National and local governments, in collaborations with civil society organizations, should further investigate the sources of the perceived tension and hostility between refugees from non-EU countries and long-term residents and make a plan to mitigate the tension by addressing the issues behind it.

c) Regarding differences in opinions among receiving countries.

- Public opinions are often related to the political climate of national or subnational contexts and are therefore, difficult to influence. It is important that EU institutions monitors and addresses anti-immigrant sentiments in its member states.
- The Italian case, however, shows that the hostile political climate at the national level is not always reflected in public opinions on integration. A possible explanation is that closer interactions, which often result in more positive attitudes, are more common in Italy than in the other study countries. To test this hypothesis, personal experiences with different refugee groups need to be further investigated.
- It is also fundamental EU and national level institutions continue to fund research on migration and integration in order to produce academic and policy outputs that will promote suitable policies and respond to often false ideas about migrants' negative impacts on receiving countries.

d) The context of inter-group contact matters to promote positive public opinions.

- Considering this finding, civil society organizations should prioritize leisure activities around common interests in which newcomers and long-term residents can participate on equal terms.
- Funding bodies at the EU, national and local levels should have special calls to support this kind of activities.
- Local governments could facilitate these encounters by lending premises, sports equipment and other resources to organize leisure activities and by promoting such activities.

e) Policy recommendations based on MIPEX-L results for better integration policies:

e.i. Local level

- Local policymakers should adopt **integration strategies** specifically targeting migrants and refugees, which incorporate clear elements including rationales, goals, actions, budgets and coordination structures to effectively implement the strategy;

- Local policymakers should develop a clear **framework to implement, monitor and evaluate an integrated integration strategy** by collecting data on migrant integration outcomes;
- Local policymakers should systematically **monitor the usage of service by migrants** across all departments/services of the municipality;
- Local policymakers should make sure that **migrants and NGOs are regularly consulted** in the formulation and implementation of policies on integration;
- Local policymakers should promote the creation of a **body/unit** specifically dedicated to migrant integration in their municipality's administrative structure;
- In case migrants' voting rights are severely restricted, local policymakers should support the **civic and political participation** of migrants by promoting non-formal initiatives open to all residents (citizen initiatives, public consultations, etc);
- Local policymakers should adopt official communications which make clear reference to the **municipality's intercultural commitment** and take positive actions to encourage meaningful interaction in public space between people of different ethnic and cultural background;
- Local policymakers should establish a dedicated service in the municipality that advises and supports victims of discrimination and take **active measures against racism, xenophobia and discrimination**;
- Local policymakers should be **aware of the possible structural constraints, socio-economic contexts, historical and political backgrounds of their localities** which make inclusive integration policies more challenging. Certain conditions such as better economic capabilities, experience with cultural diversity or non-conservative political affiliation are more conducive to inclusive migrant integration policies. **Policy makers seize these conditions when they are available**, and adopt inclusive migrant integration policies.
- When faced with the aforesaid challenges, **policy makers should seek alternative methods should be sought after** to offset their effect. The [Whole-COMM Policy Toolbox](#) could be a good source as it lays out a set of **strategy/policy options to localities** and **best practice examples** to build better policy frameworks for an effective integration framework of migrants and refugees.
- Local Policymakers should also be aware of the consequences of good integration policies on public opinion. The examination of the subset of the localities shows better integration policies are closely related to more positive perception of migrants, their integration and more supportive policies for them and vice versa. **Failure to adopt these inclusive policies risks polarisation, exclusion, and segregation of both communities.**

e.ii.National level

- Member States should put in place **multi-level coordination mechanisms** to better cooperate with local offices on migrant integration matters;

- Member States should foster the **participation of local administrations** in the decision-making process on migrant integration;
- Member States should promote and **fund accurate data collection** on outcomes and practices of integration at local level;

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