

Progress on Integration?

Assessing the impact of the EU Action Plan for the
Integration of Third Country Nationals

Eurodiaconia

Eurodiaconia is a **dynamic**, Europe wide **community** of organisations founded in the **Christian faith** and working in the tradition of Diaconia, who are committed to a Europe of **solidarity**, **equality** and **justice**. As the **leading network of Diaconia in Europe**, we connect organisations, institutions and churches providing **social and health services and education** on a Christian value base in over 30 European countries.



We bring members together to **share practices**, **impact social policy** and **reflect on Diaconia in Europe today**.

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Introduction

Eurodiaconia is a network of over 45 organisations in 32 countries, founded in the Christian faith and working in the tradition of diaconia. Representing over 30.000 local organisations, Eurodiaconia members provide social and healthcare services and promote social justice. They are engaged in all facets of support to migrants, ranging from emergency aid to integration measures such as supporting access to the labour market and social participation.

Following the adoption of the EU Action Plan on the Integration of Third Country Nationals in June 2016, Eurodiaconia has worked with its members to assess the impact of the Action Plan at national level. Ten Eurodiaconia members from Sweden, Germany, the Netherlands, France, Italy, Hungary, Spain, the Czech Republic and Austria have provided their perspective on the situation of third country nationals in their countries and their governments' policies.

The result of this assessment shows that one year after its adoption, the Action Plan has a very low visibility at national level. Nevertheless, Eurodiaconia members welcome this initiative and strongly appreciate its content. They hope to

use it as tool to support their national advocacy on the integration of third country nationals. Although there have been changes in national policies affecting the integration of third country nationals, Eurodiaconia members do not believe these policies are resulting from the Action Plan, but rather from national political dynamics.

All in all, some trends in integration policies can be identified throughout the member states. Half of the respondents have observed a rise in anti-immigrant rhetoric in their country, influencing immigration policies in a rather restrictive way. Eurodiaconia members have not seen significant changes in education policies and regret the lack of improvements in the provision of housing and social services. However, most respondents did observe significant investments in supporting third country nationals' access to the labour market.

Building on those observations, and aiming at building more cohesive societies, Eurodiaconia has developed a set of recommendations addressed to the European Union and Member States that can be found on page 9.

I. Obstacles to the integration of Third Country Nationals

A hostile atmosphere

More than half the respondents reported a general hostile atmosphere, or the lack of political will to invest in the integration of third country nationals, as an important obstacle to the successful integration of third country nationals in their country. Although the situation varies on degrees of hostility, those members stress the change of societal narrative and political mood in recent years. In some countries, this was recently reflected in the elections with an increase of extreme right-wing and populist parties. According to our members this atmosphere also visibly influences the work of the authorities and can lead to discriminatory behaviour of employees in job centres and other administrations.

No political will to support integration

Our Czech and Swedish members have observed restrictive reforms, which they both see as a tool to discourage migrants to come to their country. Eurodiaconia members in Austria and the Netherlands also consider the lack of political will to support the integration of third country nationals as discouraging migrants to come. Furthermore, our members in Austria and Italy regret the lack of a coherent national integration strategy in their countries, where decisions are either left to the regional governments (Austria) or migration is treated as an emergency situation and therefore no structural response is given (Italy). The lack of political will is also reflected in the lack of structural dialogue on integration with civil society, as stressed by our Austrian member.

Difficulty in accessing the labour market

Another key obstacle, which was also mentioned by half of the respondents, concerns the access to the labour market. While in Spain the access is in general difficult because of the high unemployment rates, members in other countries regretted the administrative and legal hurdles

(Germany, France, Hungary and Sweden). In most countries asylum seekers must wait several months before they can access the labour market and then nationals might be given the priority if they are also applying for the job. Furthermore, our members in those four countries complained about the obstacles in the recognition of academic and professional qualifications. Often, these processes are expensive and entail a complicated procedure. Only our Swedish member said the government was taking measures to speed up access to the labour market.

Insufficient language classes

The lack of affordable language classes and housing are the third group of obstacles, which several members mentioned. Especially in Spain, Hungary and Sweden, a lack of affordable housing was noted. A shortage of affordable quality language classes was mentioned as an obstacle by members from France, Hungary and Sweden. In Hungary in particular, our members reported that there was no financial support from the state for language classes, which makes it very expensive for refugees and asylum seekers. Some NGOs are therefore providing language classes for free, however, there are waiting lists of up to 6 months and some NGOs can only run the classes thanks to volunteers. In Sweden, the “Swedish for immigrants” course is open only to migrants who have a social security number, excluding those who are still waiting for a residence permit.

Uncertainty makes integration difficult

Our members in Germany and Sweden also perceive the uncertainty which migrants often face for several months or years as a significant hurdle to their integration. This uncertainty can be related to the long waiting time for asylum claims or the lack of a long-term perspective to stay, as well as the restrictions of family reunification. They stress that a long-term perspective to stay encourages integration, as

migrants expect that their efforts will pay off. On the contrary, uncertainty is detrimental to integration, because the risk and fear of being sent back make integration efforts more difficult and less useful. Migrants who benefit from a temporary suspension of deportation, asylum seekers who are waiting for their response and refugees under subsidiary protection all face this lack of a secure long-term perspective.

Additional obstacles

Some other aspects were mentioned by single members, but could also be relevant to other

Member States. For example, our member in Hungary stressed the lack of access to education for children as well as adults. Eurodiaconia's French member regretted that the approach to integration is not sufficiently considering the need to build bridges between two cultures. According to them the focus is too much on learning the language, and doesn't take sufficient account of the person's background. On a similar note, our German member regretted the many obligation or sanction-driven approaches to integrate quickly, which they perceive as counter-productive

III. Overview of changes in Member States since 2016

The development of anti-immigrant political rhetoric

Since 2016, many governments in Europe reacted to the change in migration flux by reducing migrants' rights and developing a strong anti-immigrant political rhetoric.

Since 2016, the basic financial support for refugees has been cut down in Hungary. Furthermore, asylum seekers arriving at the border are regularly detained and the political rhetoric describes migration as a threat. In such a hostile context, most NGOs are afraid to speak out, as it could affect their ability to support people in need.

Similar political rhetoric has also been reported from the Netherlands, where this has resulted in a decrease of local income-support for the integration of third country nationals.

In Austria, a new "integration law" was adopted in October 2017. Eurodiaconia's Austrian member expects negative effects on integration as it follows a sanction-based logic instead of outlining positive incentives and support measures. Diaconia Austria regrets the essence of the law which it feels does not seem to be based on the principle that integration is a two-way process, but rather on a sanction-based approach. It also lacks provisions for trauma

therapy and psychological support, and the promotion of better access to affordable housing and adequate minimum income.

No changes in pre-departure and pre-arrival measures

Members have reported some minor changes in resettlement rules, but there have been no significant additional efforts in terms of pre-departure and pre-arrival measures.

The Czech Republic had a relocation scheme for refugees but it only supported 12 people. All in all, nothing is done to encourage third country nationals to move to the Czech Republic except maybe through companies, who try to attract workers from Ukraine. Despite the call from industry representatives to facilitate immigration, politicians stick to their anti-immigrant rhetoric upon which policies are built.

According to Eurodiaconia's German member, there have also been no changes in pre-departure or pre-arrival measures. The German Diakonie has been part of a project called 'vorbereitet ankommen' ('arriving prepared') in Turkey, conducted in connection with language courses at the Goethe Institute. Recently, Iraqi refugees who have been resettled to Germany, have been able to take a course in Turkey before their arrival in Germany. While this is a promising

project, it has not been linked with any structural approach to pre-departure and pre-arrival measures.

Eurodiaconia's Dutch member has reported a slight increase in the number of UNHCR refugees for resettlement from 500 to 750; Spain has also indicated changes in resettlement options.

No major changes in education policies

Eurodiaconia members have reported no major changes in education measures. Eurodiaconia members insist on the need to develop sufficient affordable language learning possibilities (France, Germany, Hungary).

In Germany, many regions have introduced 'Willkommensklassen' (welcome classes) since 2015 to provide language classes to children during their first year in the arrival country. Our German member, Diakonie Deutschland, considers these special classes as an important and good measure.

Diakonie Deutschland also stresses the need for more social workers in schools. Existing pilot projects are not sufficiently financed, leaving teachers alone with the additional burden of supporting migrant children. Public authorities are aware of the challenge and willing to address it by investing more in education.

In the Netherlands, there are no major changes expected. However, whereas the policy regarding language acquisition was previously seen as the exclusive responsibility of the third-country national (assisted by a municipal loan to pay for the courses) it has now become a shared responsibility with the municipality.

Investment in employment & vocational training

It seems that governments have invested most in vocational training and employment support. Eurodiaconia members report political efforts to improve TCN's skills assessment (Sweden, Germany) and facilitate their entry into the labour market (Sweden, Germany, Austria). However, integration into the labour market can also be

limited for political reasons (the Netherlands, Italy) or because of existing high unemployment (Spain).

The Austrian government has started implementing a 'labour market integration law' for migrants in October 2017. This law introduces a mandatory 'integration year' for newly arrived migrants. During this year, migrants receive language courses, access to employment services and vocational training with civilian service organisations (Zivildienstorganisationen). Diakonie Austria agrees with the overall logic of making those compulsory and welcomes the fact that it allows for the development of more tailor-made support for employment pathways than before. However, they regret the restrictive focus on civilian service organisations, which excludes other employers and thus reduces the chance that migrants will find regular employment after their 'integration year'.

Another new opportunity for asylum seekers and refugees in Austria are small services for private persons which are paid through "service checks" (Dienstleistungsscheques). Before, this was limited to Austrian citizens or migrants holding a residence permit. While this change improves the situation of asylum seekers who couldn't work before, the new measure is unlikely to facilitate better access to the labour market, as it does not feature any training or job orientation.

In Sweden, the government has announced several measures to improve labour market access for newly arrived migrants. These measures (entering into force in January 2018) include improved access to vocational training, but also access to 'introductory jobs' which are 80% financed by the government to make it more attractive for employers to include migrants in their workforce. Moreover, since 2017, unaccompanied minors, whose asylum request has been rejected and who don't have family members in other EU countries, can now obtain a temporary residence permit, valid up until the age of 18, if they are enrolled in an educational

institution. After finishing high school, they have 6 months to search for employment – and if they succeed, they can receive a permanent residence permit.

In the Netherlands, recognized refugees will still only be allowed to take up formal employment six months after receiving permission to stay. This has been an issue in the past between the Dutch government and the EU where the Dutch government explicitly deviated from the European Commission's views.

The difficult economic situation in Italy with high unemployment rates has a heavy influence on public perception and makes it difficult for politicians to take positive measures for migrants. Migrants therefore, must have recourse to "universal" provisions available to all, even if these are not well adapted to their needs. However, there is a promising new project of national civic or community service for migrants. It calls for a period of training, followed by an experience of volunteer work in local communities. Participants also receive partial economic support. The only down side is the limited size of the project (approximately 3,000 people).

In Germany, the law on integration has changed, and now includes a skills assessment at the very beginning of the asylum procedure, so that labour market integration is an objective from the start of the integration process. Asylum seekers with a good prospect of staying, and 'tolerated' persons have access to measures preparing for work, vocational training, and financial support. The only condition to access these measures is sufficient knowledge of the German language. Three months after having filed the asylum application, asylum seekers can enter the labour market.

Insufficient changes in policies for the provision of basic services

Eurodiaconia members report insufficient efforts to improve the provision of services to third country nationals. They have particularly

underlined the issue of housing as a key area that necessitates proactive action for integration. More generally language and cultural biases remain decisive barriers in access to services.

» Housing

Eurodiaconia members have often highlighted housing as a key sector under pressure for migrants as well as for native-born citizens. Migrants are particularly disadvantaged on the housing market and need additional support measures to access adequate and affordable housing. To respond to this need, Diakonie Austria is leading a major project of renting properties. There, our member takes on the role as an interface between interacting with owners and subletting to migrants who otherwise have difficulties accessing the housing market. In this way, a trustful relationship can be established with the landlords.

In Germany, a reform in 2016 introduced the "assignment of residence" as an integration measure. The aim was to disperse the refugees over the territory to facilitate integration. However, this has not always facilitated integration. Even refugees who obtained their residence permit can't choose where they want to live, unless they have found a job offer elsewhere. Furthermore, family reunification is only possible with the immediate family, and other ties from extended family are not recognized as a valid reason to move.

In Sweden, the government positively amended its legislation in 2016 concerning municipalities' responsibility to provide apartments for newly arrived third country nationals. The government can now force municipalities to receive and provide housing for those who have been granted residence permits. Before, the government relied on municipalities' voluntary cooperation. This measure is seen as ensuring a fairer distribution and an effective way to improve the housing situation for migrants.

» Health

Access to health services remain a challenge for third country nationals in many member states. In Germany for example, the right to healthcare is well implemented overall, but the problem of access persists due to language and cultural barriers. Furthermore, migrants rarely have the right to very specialized health services such as trauma therapy and psychological support.

[Active participation and social inclusion \(e.g. social, cultural and sports activities, ...\)](#)

Eurodiaconia members have not reported decisive changes in this area. However, it is

worth noting that it remains an important issue for some members such as Germany and France, who see intercultural "bridging" as a decisive investment for social cohesion. In Germany, the government has increased its funding for active participation, to counter and prevent radicalisation.

In the Netherlands, the government has established a so-called 'participation declaration' which third-country nationals are obliged to sign, binding them to certain obligations they would then undertake to integrate.

Conclusion

Overall, Eurodiaconia members have not seen the impact of the EU Action Plan on their national policies. They often have had to face a changing political rhetoric, driven by fear of the changes in the migration flux, particularly in 2015. This has not diminished their determination, as together with many civil society groups they have stood up to fill the gaps left by their governments, and to improve the possibilities for integration of third country nationals.

They believe there is an urgent need to react to the development of the increasingly hostile anti-

immigrant rhetoric affecting European societies. Finally, Eurodiaconia members believe the way forward for better integration is to invest as a priority in education, vocational training and access to the labour market as well as a better access to social services and financial support.

Eurodiaconia believes that the EU Action Plan for the integration of third country nationals features good content, but has an insufficient political weight, leaving the real political direction for integration policies up to Member States' governments.

Recommendations to foster the implementation of the EU Action Plan for the Integration of Third Country Nationals

To ensure the effective implementation of the EU Action Plan, Eurodiaconia calls on the EU to:

- Carefully **monitor how Member States implement the EU Action Plan** on the Integration of Third Country Nationals and ensure adequate support through EU Funds, such as the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF), the Fund for European Aid to the most deprived (FEAD) and the European Social Fund (ESF);
- Take measures to **counter populist rhetoric and hate speech**, through providing credible alternative and positive narratives and actively promote EU fundamental rights and values of tolerance and non-discrimination;
- Increase and **support multi-stakeholder dialogue** at European and national level including civil society organisations, in particular migrant-led organisations.

To ensure the effective implementation of the EU Action Plan, Eurodiaconia calls on Member States to:

Fight anti-immigrant rhetoric by

- Fighting hate speech in the public discourse **highlighting and responding to wrongful information** and anti-immigrant rhetoric to prevent its spreading
- **Recognising some of the root causes fuelling anti-immigrant rhetoric**, which are often related to poverty and exclusion of a part of the native-born population, and addressing them.

Improve access to education by

- **Increasing enrolment in schools or other types of education** (e.g. apprenticeships) of newly arrived young third country nationals beyond compulsory school age, for instance through the development of action plans setting out concrete targets at national or regional level;
- **Ensure teachers are adequately trained to manage diversity and integration** and schools have **sufficient means** to adequately address migrant children's needs.

Improve access to language classes and vocational training by

- Offering a broad range of **high quality and free language classes** that are adapted to different levels and needs, and available quickly after arrival;
- Facilitating the **quick recognition of diploma and validation of skills**, for example through the use of the EU Skills Profile Tool for Third Country Nationals;
- Providing **access to vocational training opportunities**, ideally in combination with language classes and on the job training.

Improve access to housing by

- Providing **affordable and adequate housing for all**, in line with the housing principles set out in the European Pillar of Social Rights and in cooperation with local actors;
- **Facilitating access to social and healthcare services**, including psychological and therapeutic support, by reducing administrative barriers and by providing special guidance for third country nationals.

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