

“Which reception and integration policy towards refugees?”

Seminar, 5 November 2019

Paris, European Parliament Liaison Office

Introduction

On 5 November 2019, Confrontations Europe organised a seminar gathering numerous participants coming from diverse backgrounds: high-ranking civil servants, researchers, think tankers, embassy advisors (from EU member states but not only, Canada was also represented), members of NGOs involved in the reception and integration of asylum seekers...

The main objective of the debate was to decipher and analyse how asylum seekers are welcomed in the EU member states. What tools are in their hands thanks to the EU funds? How could integration be set up and even amplified?

Four years after the so called “refugee crisis”, it appears essential to provide an overview of the context, and especially to focus on Germany, which welcomed about a million asylum seekers during the migratory peak of arrivals in 2015, and on France, a very centralised country in which reception does not match the challenges.

In order to have a constructive debate, Confrontations Europe gathered the following speakers:

- **Nikolaus Meyer-Landrut**, German Ambassador to France, a diplomat specialised on EU issues who was also, before joining Paris in 2015, Angela Merkel’s European Affairs counsellor;
- **Alain Régnier**, the French government’s delegate for refugee integration, appointed by President Emmanuel Macron in January 2018.
- As Brussels is regularly criticised on its alleged inaction on integration, we invited **Antoine Savary** from DG HOME, in charge of the integration funds at the European Commission;
- **Corinne Torre**, Head of Mission of Doctors without Borders France, added a concrete testimony on what is done by a humanitarian organisation in order to compensate for the lack of reception solutions in France.

What is at stake

In France, in Germany to a lesser extent, and in many EU member states, the issue of welcoming and integrating refugees has been instrumentalised by far-right parties and populist voices, and has sparked tense debates. For Confrontations Europe, the migration issue is all the more a priority project as it tackles important principles which are at the core

of the EU and should not be denied: solidarity, state of law (with the recurrent debate on the “offence of solidarity”), identity and above all democracy. Better welcoming and integrating refugees ensures cohesion in countries which are threatened by a deep crisis of representative democracy and illiberalism. The integration issue deepens divisions as it creates divisions within civil society between the “solidary hosts” for instance and the fringe of the population in favour of closing the borders.

In all EU countries, the debates on refugees regularly become irrational, and even hysterical, although figures show that the proportion of third-country nationals among the populations is really low.

In 2018, around 22.3 million third-country nationals were residing in EU member states, representing around 4.4% of the total population. Moreover, there were around 38.2 million residents born outside of the EU (or 7.5% of the population, compared to 6.6% in 2014). The largest number of third-country nationals residents was found in Germany (5.5 million) followed by Italy (3.6 million), France (3.1 million), Spain (2.6 million) and the UK (2.4 million) – while in relative terms (in % of the population), third-country nationals were prominent in Latvia (13.8%) and Estonia (13.5%) followed by Austria (7.8%), Luxembourg (7.2%), Germany (6.6%), Malta (6.0%) and Italy (5.9%).

An EU legislative framework does exist¹: adopted in 2013, a Directive lays down standards for the reception of applicants to international protection. It determines what should be done in terms of housing, access to care, or to jobs... This text is actually under revision in order to harmonise reception between the member states (using the EASO standards²), to reinforce the struggle against “secondary movements”³ and to offer a better autonomy and integration of the refugees (notably by shortening the waiting period before applying to a job to six months). The EU plays, on the contrary, a very limited role on integration, which is in the hands of each member state: there is no Directive on integration; only a financial support offered to the member states through the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) or the European Social Fund (ESF).

The political will and the choice of investment are nevertheless very different from one country to another. Germany spends 20 billion euros per year for reception, integration and to support the local authorities in charge of the refugees. In France, in 2019, 59 million euros were spent to help 40,000 refugees during their integration process. And even if the system remains very centralised, 10 contracts have already been signed with ten cities (Strasbourg, Nantes Rennes, Montpellier, Nancy...).

¹ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX%3A32013L0033>

² <https://www.easo.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EASO%20Guidance%20on%20reception%20conditions%20-%20operational%20standards%20and%20indicators%5B3%5D.pdf>

³ Movements of migrants, including refugees and asylum seekers, who for different reasons move from the country in which they first arrived to seek protection or permanent resettlement elsewhere.

What remains debated / The obstacles

In many member states, the reception of asylum seekers is at fault. Newcomers are sleeping in the streets of capital cities and in smaller towns in very difficult conditions. This also concerns entire families, who have no other choice than living in the streets with their children. If the situation in Greece is often denounced as the camps in the islands are overcrowded, no short-term solutions seem to be found. And the situation keeps deteriorating. This is also the case in France, where huge camps have emerged, especially in the north of the country, near Calais or in Paris. In France, the main problem remains the housing. Beneficiaries of international protection do not find any allocation and remain in asylum seekers centres, a situation which generates a double problem: it definitely slows down their integration as they stay among asylum seekers and, at the same time, it prevents other asylum seekers from getting a chance to enter in these centres, which are not enough.

Doctors Without Borders has had no other choice in France than to help the unaccompanied minors they were healing near the camps in the streets: the NGO opened a centre in Pantin close to Paris, in December 2017, in which they gathered psychologists, legal experts, social workers and also nurses to take care of the minors. Doctors Without Borders has even opened a hotel in Neuilly Plaisance to put a roof over the teenagers' heads. Thanks to a budget of 1 million euro, it has offered protection to 1,600 unaccompanied minors since December 2017.

Another obstacle is language proficiency. Many refugees do not succeed in getting a job because of their insufficient mastery of the language. Admittedly, an effort is made on this issue. Germany already provides 600 to 900 hours of German language for each refugee, and France has chosen to increase language training, which is part of the 72 recommendations⁴ made by Aurélien Taché, a French MP from the ruling party La République en Marche.

The access to the labour market is still slow and long as many employers still require diplomas to hire a worker, while many newcomers do not hold any, either because they lost them on the route or because they never got any.

⁴ <http://aurelientache.fr/2018/02/20/lemonde72/>

Conclusion and perspectives

Reception and integration of refugees suffer from important gaps that could be filled through some measures:

1. Language training should be at the core of every national programme. Increasing the number of hours dedicated to language lessons is an essential solution.
2. The issue of housing remains the most important sticking point and blocks the refugee integration. In France, for example, some mayors have to face the blockage of regional prefects.
3. Integration in the labour market should be harmonised among the member states. The delay can be up to 6 or even 9 months, while it is only 3 months in Germany for instance.
4. There is a real need of investments in trainings, but in a flexible way. Informal competences should be recognised, while many European countries remain obsessed with diplomas that sometimes refugees do hold but cannot produce. Germany has set up a project on 30 areas of employment⁵ that can be entered without any diploma.
5. In order to bring together authorities, NGOs, civil societies and asylum seekers, programmes should involve local and regional authorities in a very effective. This is the approach already chosen by some European countries such as Denmark, Sweden, and even Norway⁶.
6. Some local programmes should be developed or even duplicated in other member states. To take a French example, the HOPE programme (“Hébergement, Orientation, Parcours vers l’Emploi”, i.e. “Housing, Guidance, Road to Employment”) which has been developed in 2017 is based on a partnership between public and private actors. Even if this project remains very small and has accompanied very few refugees, it is considered as an important step in its process and methodology.

⁵ <https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/en/our-projects/identifying-occupational-skills/>

Among these areas: building construction worker, cooking, farming, skilled metal worker, retail sale assistant, mechanic...

⁶ The European Commission tries to encourage such initiatives and has organised an important meeting on this issue in Brussels on 3rd December, https://europa.eu/newsroom/events/go-local-supporting-regions-cities-and-rural-areas-migrants'-integration_en