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URBAN RESPONSES TO REFUGEES

REPORT



This event is part of Friends of Europe's Migration Action initiative, through which we examine the imperative of migration in the context of economic sustainability and demographics, as well as its impact on public services, communities and security. Our approach is based on seeing migration and integration as assets rather than as threats. Changing the current narrative surrounding migration, by emphasising the positive over the negative and presenting citizens with a realistic picture of migration, is one of our key aims. Involving cities and municipalities, private foundations, national governments, international institutions and more, is in our view key to ensuring a more horizontal and holistic approach.

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SOLUTIONS TO REFUGEE INTEGRATION LIE AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

The work of local actors is crucial in the successful hosting of refugees in Europe, though their needs are often overlooked by national governments, panellists discussed at a Friends of Europe Policy Insight entitled “Urban responses to refugees” on 25 January.

The event invited local front-line officials and other experts to share best policies and practices for responding to refugee arrivals. Innovative responses at this level are vital in order to address the large influxes of refugees which have sent many systems into shock over the last several years, creating tensions between states and their international obligations, as well as between national and local governments.

The challenge is particularly great in Turkey, which hosts more than 3 million Syrian refugees – more than half of those who have fled Syria. “Yes, Turkish people like guests, but sometimes when it starts to have social, economic and political impacts, then people may start to worry about the future,” said Hande Bozatlı, Honorary President of the Assembly of European Regions (AER). “These are the same worries that European citizens are having. So, when we talk to each other we understand more about each other and that helps us to find more constructive solutions.”

However, cities and their needs are often neglected. “Urban areas are the unseen areas,” said Bozatlı. “They are close to citizens, so they are the first to face the problems of refugees. We are also working on the benefits of refugees: it is not just about problems. As urbanisation increases, more refugees will start living in urban areas. That’s why we need to get all together and try to find common constructive solutions and support urban politicians and bureaucrats. Otherwise in the future we will blame ourselves. It is our generation that is facing the challenge right now, and if we do not do enough it will be too late.”

The Turkish city of Gaziantep lies less than 100 km north of Aleppo, and currently hosts 600,000 Syrians, of whom only 40,000 live in refugee camps. “When we think about the refugee situation, often we consider them to be guests,” said Mayor [Fatma Şahin](#). “But think about a guest staying in someone’s home for seven years. So we had to devise an emergency action plan to cover basic needs, such as food and shelter.”

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Hande Bozatlı

Honorary President of the Assembly of European Regions (AER)

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Fatma Şahin
Mayor of Gaziantep

The city established a dedicated department for migration flows, set up workshops and focused on priority areas. The aims included discouraging hate speech and stopping the formation of ghettos. “We said that only 10% of workers in a shop could be Syrian,” noted Şahin. The city also wanted refugee children to attend state schools and walk in parks together with local children. “Education was the most important thing,” she said. “If children are not included in the schooling system, they could end up in the hands of terrorists.”

Refugees were also encouraged to use the skills they brought with them, as the new arrivals included doctors, teachers and engineers. Language lessons and vocational courses were made available. The city also provided consultancy services on subjects such as the law and worked with the local community to encourage the acceptance of refugees. “We told the local community they have to be patient,” said Şahin. “If there is hope, there is no hatred.”

INTEGRATION THROUGH SCHOOLS AND WORK

According to [Magnus Berntsson](#), President of the Swedish Region of Västra Götaland, where refugees account for 2% of the population, the municipalities that work best with new arrivals are those with financial muscle or a flexible structure. However, national authorities often fail to understand the problems on the ground. “In Sweden, the national level has the responsibility, but the local and regional levels are doing all the work. At national level you can argue that you want a particular fantastic future and engage in politics from there. But that is not the place where local and regional politicians start their discussions. We are dealing with everyday life and all the problems and opportunities. We meet people in shops and at children’s soccer games, so we deal with the situation as it is.”

Giving refugees the opportunity to work is also an important factor in integration. Creating more flexible labour markets in the short term provides access to new arrivals. “We are discussing more about integration and building a society,” Berntsson said. “That creates other tensions and opportunities. We know that a lot of refugees that come from Syria have background in the healthcare field. In the system in the old days, someone coming to Sweden needed to go

through a number of steps to gain access to the ordinary labour market. But that is not the way we can work anymore. We have created a lot of fast tracks, especially for people in healthcare, but also for engineers. Before it would take six to nine years before you were ready to go into productive work. Now you can be ready to work in two-and-a-half or three years. We needed to be flexible.”

“One driving force was demand in the labour sector,” he said. “We need a lot of people in the healthcare sector. So it is a waste of resources not to allow them to work. Otherwise, the children get integrated quickly because they go to school and have friends of Swedish origin, but parents take too much time. That also creates differences between children and the grown-ups, and that is terrible for creating a good society for the future.”

However, Sweden is one of a number of EU member states with relatively closed labour markets, where many jobs require professional qualifications earned over several years of training. This is also true of Austria and Germany, two other countries where refugees most want to settle. “These are the only countries you should not go to because they have highly institutionalised labour markets, and you have to do many years of apprenticeship to work,” said [Rainer Münz](#), Advisor on Migration and Demography at the European Commission Political Strategy Centre. Without a certificate, without showing many years inside an educational or apprentice system, a person is not allowed to work, even if they have done the same job at home. And there’s a limit to how far this problem can be fixed. “We can work to deinstitutionalise labour markets, but you can only do that to a certain degree,” he said. “The nationals don’t want to see themselves bypassed by refugees getting fast track treatment. So there is a balance.”

Turkey has a relatively liberal labour market, which is one of the reasons its hosting of refugees has been praised, said Münz. “The central government has decided to give status to Syrian refugees,” he said. They have not been treated as non-deportable aliens, but rather as people. “Turkey has decided to give a future to these people inside Turkey. It is not stockpiling Syrians in order to send them back tomorrow.”

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COORDINATION BETWEEN NATIONAL AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

A relatively high degree of coordination between different levels of government also plays a vital role. According to Münz, “Sometimes in Europe the local government wants one thing and the national government has a different position. Usually it works when a city is in the same hands politically as the national government. Sometimes there can be party competition over the issue.” This can happen when, for example, a mayor is from a different political grouping from the ruling national government.

Even without political competition, national and local governments in Europe tend to have different priorities. “Local governments often tend to say: ‘We need to take care of people regardless of their status,’” said Münz. “There is a tendency to care about people and not first to ask for an ID or for status. At national level in many European countries, the question is the other way around. They don’t want to have people starving in the streets, so there is a more security-driven approach, which instead highlights that asylum-seekers ought not to work – let’s wait. At local level you say: ‘They can do something.’ But then the national government would say, ‘But then they get integrated – and how do we get rid of them after they have been denied asylum?’ That is often the case, and a whole debate sets in about what to do with them.”

THE IMPORTANCE OF POSITIVE ATTITUDES

The matter of welcoming and integrating refugees has been controversial throughout Europe and in some cases has sparked ugly rhetoric. “The issue has called into question the future of Europe and what brings Europe together and pulls us apart,” said moderator [Dharmendra Kanani](#), Director of Strategy at Friends of Europe. “We’ve noticed in the past week or so a hardening in the debate globally on this matter. We had in Israel Benjamin Netanyahu saying that a certain group of migrants had to leave by end of March. They will get money to go, but if not, they will use other tools to incarcerate people that don’t leave. In the same period of time we have seen what Poland has done and what Hungary has done, and other nations are suddenly tightening the screws on refugees and migration. When we hear comments being made by leaders in Europe and across the world on the issue of refugees, you feel a panic – a silent panic in your heart and your head – and it feels like we have not learned the lessons of what took place 100 years ago.”

However, some Europeans have been moved to help refugees in need. While the Netherlands' hosting of refugees sparked some protests, it also led large numbers of volunteers to offer assistance. "In the Netherlands in 2015, we had 60,000 asylum applications, most of them from refugees, and the focus was always on what went wrong," said [Kati Piri](#), Member of the European Parliament Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET). "Most often, things went wrong when local governments were not deeply involved in the planning – when the central authorities decided there would be 2,000 people placed in a pretty small community as of tomorrow. That is when things went wrong, and that is when communities started to object. But in the same year, 60,000 Dutch people registered officially as volunteers. If you had looked at the balance in the media you wouldn't have thought this was the case. So we had as many registered volunteers, wanting to work with refugees 12 hours a week, as we had asylum applications."

Notably, after refugees arrive, they can come to be seen as members of their new communities. "I find debates with local authorities and mayors more useful than national governments because they are dealing with the situation and know what is at stake," Piri said. "In the Netherlands, whenever we open an asylum centre there is always a protest, but when we close it there is a bigger protest because people get used to it – they get to know the people."

She noticed the importance of uniting a community around help for refugees in Turkey. "We always say we need to assist Syrian refugees in Turkey, but the Syrian refugees live in the same community as the other citizens of Gaziantep," she said. "That's why I think it's very important to take a holistic approach, and not a divided approach, which serves the needs of all communities. At least with our aid we should not increase the tensions in a local society."

Instead of simply reacting to crises, the EU should also try to coordinate its foreign and development policies to try to make crisis outbreaks less likely. "What I'm worried about is that we see our whole relationship with Africa only to curb migration," Piri said. "In the past, as the EU, we always had sustainable development and the rule of law – things that in the long run serve to prevent poverty and local wars. Now, I'm afraid we are always looking at the very short term. We have to make a difference in the long run. We have the External Action Service active in all these countries, and we could make our priority to look more at the long term. I'm sure it is being done – but not at priority level. Our priority now is to make quick-return deals with individual African countries, so that we return people who have no right of asylum. We need a long-term strategy."

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CONCLUSION

It is at the local government level that issues pertaining to refugees receive the most attention and ways to help them contribute to society can be found. As such, it is this level that should be given greater focus and resources. No two municipalities are the same however, and while some have proven to be successful at hosting refugees thus far, often because of good coordination between local and national governments, others still struggle to overcome the challenges of hosting newcomers.

Even where there is exceptional practice in a municipality, it should not be mistaken for consistent, even or effective approaches across the nation. The conditions and criteria for effectively hosting and integrating refugees – either at the local or national level – is often conditioned by leadership at both levels, the aptitude to make it work, and a political motivation to harness the benefits of such a situation whilst not losing sight of the needs of all communities. It is also dependent on the culture of the national state or municipality and the labour market infrastructure, as well as the capacity to coordinate, collaborate and enhance some of these structures to good effect.

National and local governments should draw lessons from each other’s experiences – for example as regards integrating refugees into the labour market, particularly in sectors where there are labour shortages. In general, when hosting arrangements are well-coordinated they stand a greater chance of success and can result in refugees being seen in a more positive light by local populations. When this is the case, the chances rise that they will be integrated successfully.



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