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BOOSTING MIGRANT & REFUGEE INTEGRATION

GOVERNMENT AND PRIVATE SECTOR COOPERATION

REPORT



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INTRODUCTION

Participants at the 16 May Friends of Europe dinner debate “Boosting migrant & refugee integration: government and private sector cooperation” highlighted that integration is the key issue facing the European Union, with challenges being poor management, a shortage of joined-up thinking and trouble accessing finances – not necessarily a lack of available resources.

Coming together to identify areas of cooperation, current gaps and good practices in the public-private relationship, participants broadly agreed that inclusion is a two-way street which must involve local communities as well as new arrivals. Practical examples were provided by speakers from the cities of Amsterdam and Athens, who showed that while the “crisis” situation may have abated for now, inclusion and integration remain ongoing challenges. Furthermore, some new arrivals may not have the incentive to integrate in their port of first arrival, making it clear that there is no one-size-fits-all solution for integrating newcomers. For successful integration, local government, the private sector, civil society and other stakeholders must understand and tailor responses to the differing aspirations and priorities of migrants, refugees and local communities.

During the debate, participants came to a consensus around several themes, including the importance of newcomers having access to realistic networks rather than undergoing forced integration; the need to break down silos so that different stakeholders, including both public and private, can work together; the use of data to make smarter choices; and the promotion of common values.

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Georgios Kaminis
Mayor of Athens

“Integration as a concept doesn’t work anymore in cities. Integration takes place in companies. It’s about connecting people not through ethnicity, but through their interests or aspirations”

Maurice Crul

Professor of Sociology
at the Free University of Amsterdam

FROM CRISIS TO STATUS QUO

The summers of 2015 and 2016 saw migration into Greece hit crisis levels. During those months around 200,000 people arrived, but the vast majority continued their journey northwards. While there are still about 60,000 people “stranded” in Greece, and the situation remains fragile, it is no longer a crisis situation.

When the first wave arrived, practical issues dominated the debate, such as how and where to accommodate the new arrivals during the summer months when many Greeks were on holiday. In response, the city of Athens dedicated a municipal space for the country’s first temporary accommodation centre. The centre was located in a poor area where public works had been waiting a number of years; this situation therefore created an opportunity to use funds for the good of the existing community as well as new arrivals.

“You have to be very practical,” explained Georgios Kaminis, Mayor of Athens. “You are dealing with people who have seen their lives change from one day to another. You have to be very well aware of the legal framework, civil rights and human rights.”

He highlighted three issues which have combined to make the situation more difficult: the Greek economic backdrop; the fact that many migrants and refugees do not want to stay in Greece, as they have friends and family in other EU countries; and that Greece has historically been a country of emigration, and as a result many Greeks are not accustomed to the idea of living alongside people of other cultures or religions.

UNDERSTANDING THE INDIVIDUAL

On the other side of Europe is Amsterdam, a so-called “majority-minority” city in which people of Dutch descent are the minority. As a result, refugees tend to live in communities alongside other immigrants or their descendants. This new reality requires a major shift in how policymakers and practitioners think of integration.

Indeed, a project focusing on highly-skilled, young, urban professionals from Syria, who were housed in mostly immigrant neighbourhoods, found that it was not the government or social workers that helped them to establish themselves in Amsterdam, but others in the same profession.

“Integration as a concept doesn’t work anymore in cities. Integration takes place in companies,” explained Maurice Crul, Professor of Sociology at the Free University of Amsterdam. “It’s about connecting people not through ethnicity, but through their interests or aspirations.” The focus should be on linking people up with networks that suit them.

In many countries, there is a huge focus on learning the local language as a tool for integration. While this has been widely accepted as beneficial, many refugees already speak a European language which would allow them to carry on with their studies: English. “Why don’t we treat Syrian students as international students?” asked Crul. “Why do they have to learn Dutch rather than follow courses in English?”

Entering into study already presents its own challenges, particularly as many refugees will work at the same time. One of the best routes to successful integration, however, is if professionals can continue to do work that helps them on their career trajectory. This is important not just for continuing a career path, but also for avoiding the psychological problems that can stem from doing nothing.

Indeed, the mental health issue is another overlooked barrier to integration. Refugees have undergone trauma, one participant explained, and one of their greatest fears is “uncertainty of their future, their children’s future”. If the mental health issue is not addressed now, it will persist in the next generation.

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DIFFERENT STAKEHOLDERS WORKING TOGETHER

In order for successful integration to take place, the needs of the different stakeholders must be met. This requires cooperation among all those involved: newcomers, existing residents, private and public institutions, NGOs and government across all levels.

The private sector plays an important role in boosting integration efforts - from providing vocational and language training, to creating platforms linking qualified migrants and refugees to jobs and opportunities. Governments can reward businesses for such action, even if only through recognition.

Unfortunately companies have a fear of exposure, and refugee-friendly labels may not necessarily be wanted by some that are afraid of losing customers or investors with less favourable views of migration. With companies scared to make a misstep in an area that is politically sensitive, continued widespread public education is desirable.

One approach is to “mainstream the refugee issue into everything”, including housing, education, childcare, healthcare, and so on. To achieve this, Kaminis advocated for giving more responsibility to city-level administrations. “Cities must have access to direct funding,” he said, adding that this was something to consider under the European Commission’s Multiannual Financial Framework.

It is also vital to understand the target audience for integration programmes. “We have to integrate legal migrants coming in a regularised way, refugees and illegal migrants. There are also people asking for asylum and not granted it, but they stay and are not targeted with any assistance,” pointed out one participant. Regular migration may be currently well-managed but there is also irregular migration from the Mediterranean due to a lack of legal avenues for some groups.

USING THE DATA

It was widely agreed that more coordination is needed among local and national levels. “Migration authorities on one hand might have a lot of data but are not working with the Ministry of Labour or the provinces. Everybody does their own thing. We must get out of a siloed way of working,” said one participant.

“It’s not about intentions. It’s not about resources,” agreed another participant. “It’s about how they can become more synergetic.”

The way to achieve clear and comprehensive strategies could lie in data. “The state needs to have a clear focus - collect and analyse data at all stages of the integration process, from arrival right through to, for example, completing a university degree.” Better data analysis could also help to focus on the needs of individuals. “The individual has to be at the centre. Maybe you don’t need a language course right away. Maybe you need to be among English speakers in university. But look at the data.”

“We don’t have the luxury of not doing it,” pointed out one participant. “Data needs to be constantly collected as we go. Then we can use the data for later arrivals.” But scale and long-term targets must be realistic. How do you evaluate the data? It’s difficult to know what data to collect from the outset, so there is also the issue of understanding how to evaluate it from the beginning so that the right information is collected.

Another participant countered by explaining that “Data is very important, but it is a matter of narrative. Populist narratives always portray the bad aspect of the refugees. We are at a turning point where I don’t think we need more innovation, what we need is to make it sustainable. How do we ensure that all the actors don’t get tired and revert back to the status quo now that the crisis is over? They need support to consolidate.”

“We cannot wait for heroic politicians. We need systems that incentivise good behaviours, those that are looking at the medium-term interest. Otherwise we are kept to the spiral of short-term electoral interests that will hinder real investment”

“Integration is a good word, but I think that the word inclusion, building inclusive societies where the people at home feel as included as those coming in, is the key”

Shada Islam

Director of Europe & Geopolitics
at Friends of Europe

EU VALUES

It was widely agreed that having a stronger sense of what our common values are would make integration easier. Indeed, promotion of common values and more Europe in schools could create an essential sense of belonging. But this should not be limited to new arrivals. “If we don’t educate locals enough on EU values, how can we educate migrants?” asked one participant.

Unfortunately, integration efforts can be undermined by so-called fake news, populism and a race to the bottom, particularly in election years. “Politically, it’s a bit crazy to move funds from the disabled, or long-term unemployed, to refugees,” pointed out one attendee, as there are currently too many disincentives to use structural funds for migrants because they do not have a vote.

The right to vote could be the biggest power in overcoming the short-term electoral interests of politicians. “Every social class became integrated once the right to vote was expanded. It’s a great power. We speak about refugees, but we rarely hear them. We must respect their voices ... and the power of a vote is considerable,” concluded Kaminis.

In the meantime, one participant noted, “We cannot wait for heroic politicians. We need systems that incentivise good behaviours, those that are looking at the medium-term interest. Otherwise we are kept to the spiral of short-term electoral interests that will hinder real investment.”

CONCLUSION

Now is the time to tackle the challenge of welcoming newcomers by bringing together not just people, but also strategies, levels of government, data and stakeholders. In the words of one participant, “If we do not integrate, the cohesion of society is at stake.” But much is dependent upon paying attention to the individual needs and aspirations of those directly involved in the process.

“Integration is a good word,” concluded Shada Islam, Director of Europe & Geopolitics at Friends of Europe, “But I think that the word inclusion, building inclusive societies where the people at home feel as included as those coming in, is the key.” In the end, what will make or break Europe may very well be how inclusive we are.



Giorgos Kaminis, Mayor of Athens



Maurice Crul, Professor of Sociology at the Free University of Amsterdam



Elizabeth Collett, Director of the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) Europe

Maria Logotheti, Head of Office to the Mayor of Athens
Panagiotis Exarchos, Special Advisor on European and International Affairs to the Mayor of Athens



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Shada Islam, Director for Europe & Geopolitics at Friends of Europe



Mary Coulter, Migration Counsellor at the Mission of Canada to the EU

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Tel: +32 2 893 98 11

Fax: +32 2 893 98 28

Email: info@friendsofeurope.org

friendsofeurope.org

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