Housing and employment for post-2014 migrants: Lessons from small and medium-sized towns and rural areas
Policy Brief

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The aim of work package four (WP4) is to understand how and under which conditions post-2014 migrants access housing and employment in small and medium-sized towns and rural areas (SMsTRA). Based on document analysis (media sources and policy documents) and semi-structured interviews conducted between November 2021 and February 2022 in 40 localities in 8 EU countries (Austria, Belgium, Germany, Italy, Poland, Spain, Sweden, and the Netherlands), we found that the general picture is one with difficult access to housing (due to a general housing crisis) and relatively easy access to employment (due to general labour shortages). When zooming into local differences, our research confirms that favourable local economic conditions tend to make it more difficult for migrants to find a place to live but play in favour of their access to employment. If we focus on local responses, variation depends on the distribution of competences between the national, regional, and local levels of government, as well as on national and regional approaches. Locality size does also seem to play a role, with bigger localities having more knowledge, capacity, and resources to intervene and set up specific support measures. Local politics also matter in explaining variation in local responses, with progressive governments more often and more actively involved in facilitating migrants' access to housing. In terms of policy recommendations, our research highlights the need to include not only major cities but also small and medium-sized towns in deliberative EU and national fora and adapt existing support measures and funding schemes to their specific needs and limitations.

INTRODUCTION

Since 2014 many small and medium-sized towns and rural areas (SMsTRA) across Europe have experienced and dealt with an increased and often unprecedented arrival and settlement of migrants and refugees. These localities have faced the challenge of not only receiving and temporarily accommodating them but also facilitating their longer-term integration. With the war

in Ukraine, SMsTRA have been called again to carry a significant share of the responsibility for receiving refugees[1].

But are they prepared to accommodate newcomers and promote and foster immigrant integration in the medium and long-run? This question brings us to two different types of answers. First, their capacity to deal with immigrant integration can be assessed on the basis of local authorities' experience, expertise and resources, thus focusing on local policies both on paper and in practice. Second, if we want to understand the dynamics on the ground, it is fundamental to look beyond formal integration policies and also include the interaction between a wide range of actors, from public and private institutions and civil-society organisations to individual professionals as well as private citizens and corporate entities.

The analysis of immigrants' access to housing and employment in SMsTRA allows us to merge both perspectives. On the one hand, access to these two basic rights depends on the interplay between local, regional, and national administrations and their various public policies. On the other hand, non-public actors are fundamental too: housing is (partly or, in some cases, almost completely) in the hands of private owners and employment opportunities largely depend on private employers. In between, we find a broad range of intermediaries, from civil society organisations and trade unions to real estate and employment agencies, and social and personal networks.

The final purpose of this research is to understand how integration policies and processes interact with each other in SMsTRA in the field of housing and employment. What are the challenges, barriers, and opportunities that immigrants in SMsTRA face when accessing housing and employment? Which local actors are (or feel) responsible for these issues? Who provides support? What is being done to facilitate (or further complicate) their finding work and a place to live? The answer to these questions will provide important clues for EU, national, and local policymakers to understand the capacity of SMsTRA to deal with immigrant integration, their singularity vis-à-vis larger cities and the role of the different administrative levels in accompanying municipal authorities and fostering integration processes on the ground.

EVIDENCE AND ANALYSIS

The analyses and results presented in this policy brief are based on document analysis (media sources and policy documents) and on semi-structured interviews conducted between November 2021 and February 2022 in 40 SMsTRA across Europe. In total, 696 interviews were conducted: **647 at the local level**, involving mayors/members of local government responsible for integration (69), high-level local officials (75), pro-migrant groups (61) and anti-migrant groups (8), members of opposition in the local council (40), experts/journalists (27), street-level bureaucrats like municipal officials, social workers, etc. (127), employers (43), employer organisations (38), real estate

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[1] Given the timing of data collection for this study (November 2021 to February 2022), it has not been possible to take into account the arrival of Ukrainian refugees.

companies (32), non-profit service providers (95), trade unions (26) and others (6); **30 officials at the regional level**; **12 officials at the national level**; and **7 expert interviews**.

The selection of cases was very structured and theory oriented. All selected cases were directly involved in the reception of asylum-seekers and refugees between 2014 and 2017 and they are still characterized by the presence of post-2014 migrants[2]. None of the selected localities is a satellite town of a big city and 'extreme cases' were also excluded. Case selection was also aimed to maximise variation across a set of variables, including population size (with a mix of medium and small towns, and rural areas), administrative role (with and without administrative functions), experience with cultural diversity, economic and demographic situation, and the political affiliation of their local government.

a) Factors shaping access to housing and employment

Post-2014 migrants' access to housing and employment in SMsTRA is shaped by structural, policy, and societal factors. **Structural factors** are the most relevant ones, which underlines the crucial role that market forces play in both spheres. The general picture for the eight selected countries is one with difficult access to housing (due to a general housing crisis) and relatively easy access to employment (due to general labour shortages). When zooming into local differences, our research confirms that favourable local economic conditions tend to make it more difficult for migrants to find a place to live but play in favour of their access to employment. Interestingly, the quantitative analysis suggests that also locality size matters: in medium-sized towns (compared to rural and small localities) access to housing tends to be (even) more difficult while access to employment is often comparatively easy.

But structural factors go much beyond the simple question of demand and supply. As for housing, dynamics may be rather different depending on the housing ownership structure: having a greater share of public housing or private housing in the hands of individual citizens or large investment funds (often in a context of gentrification or under the impact of mass tourism) determines the degree of accessibility as well as the channels through which post-2014 migrants find housing. Public housing schemes pose higher barriers for migrants with no or precarious legal status but may be more inclusive for recognised refugees and vulnerable groups, and generally offer better protection against racial discrimination than the private housing market. As for employment, two factors seem to be of extreme importance. The first is the degree of formalization of the labour market: the bigger the share of the formal economy, the more difficult it may be to access employment – especially for people with no or provisional work and residence permits, but the more labour rights migrants may have, once they get in. The second factor has to do with the level of dependence on low-skilled workers: while in Sweden and Belgium the low demand for low-skilled workers hinders immigrants' employability, in Italy and Spain access is much easier but a highly segmented labour market channels immigrants into very specific segments, characterized by low wages and high labour precariousness. Such employment "opportunities" often do not match post-2014 migrants' previous

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[2] Note that this category includes all third-country nationals who arrived in the years after 2014 (i.e., during and after the so-called "refugee crisis"), independent of their legal status, and of whether they have claimed asylum or not. It thus comprises a very diverse range of legal statuses and of corresponding entitlements and barriers in terms of access to housing and employment.

education and skills and the extremely low salaries can in turn become a significant limitation in terms of their housing access.

Apart from the structural factors, also **policies** are key when explaining access to housing and employment. Interestingly, the most relevant policies facilitating access are not necessarily those that target migrants but rather social policies in general. National reports also show that post-2014 migrants' access is also and sometimes even more determined by exclusionary policies than those that aim to facilitate access. In this regard, national immigration and asylum laws are extremely relevant, since they determine who has the right to stay (residence permit) and who the right to work (work permit). While social policies generally aim to foster inclusion, their intersection with immigration and asylum regulations often leads to effective exclusion of (certain) newcomers, for instance when access to services depends on a minimum time of residence (in the country, region, or locality) or when welfare benefits are made conditional on good performance in particular (often employment and language related) integration indicators. Finally, labour policies may also have a double (contradictory) effect: while on paper they tend to include (thus protect) all migrants irrespectively of their legal status, requirements (and particularly long and cumbersome procedures) regarding the homologation of titles may end up excluding the most high-skilled migrants, even in contexts of high labour demands.

Finally, the **societal factor** is also key, again with inclusionary and exclusionary effects. On the one hand, both the qualitative and quantitative analyses show the crucial role of informal networks (contacts with citizens in general or co-ethnics in particular) in facilitating access to housing and employment. This seems to be particularly true in smaller towns and in the absence of formal support structures, particularly in countries such as Poland, Italy, and Spain. On the other hand, in most localities across the eight selected countries interviewees refer to discriminatory practices as a key factor hindering migrants' access to housing and employment. Discrimination can be based either directly on ethnicity/origin or via strict requirements in terms of income and job stability or concerns vis-à-vis very precarious and temporary legal statuses. Interestingly, (racial) discrimination seems to be more common regarding access to housing (with a higher demand than supply) than regarding access to employment (where in a context of labour shortages it is the other way around). In other words, discriminatory practices also depend (at least partially) on supply and demand.

b) Factors explaining diversity in local responses

Local responses to facilitate post-2014 migrants' access to housing and employment depend on the (vertical) distribution of competences within multilevel governance systems (which significantly differ from country to country, and between housing and employment) as well as on national and regional approaches to (and underlying framings of) migrant and refugee integration. For example, in Belgium there are very clear differences between Wallonia (much more centralised and with a colour-blind approach) and Flanders (where responsibilities are decentralised at the local level and with a more colour-conscious approach); and in Spain the two Catalan municipalities clearly differ from the rest, which at least partly reflects the Catalan government's much more active and inclusive approach to migrant integration.

In addition to these contextual factors, the Whole-COMM project assessed to what extent locality size, local politics, previous experience with cultural diversity and structural conditions play a role in explaining variation in local responses. Our findings suggest that indeed the **locality size** is a key

explanatory factor. On the one hand, bigger localities (usually hosting a higher number of recently arrived migrants) have more knowledge, capacity, and resources to intervene and set up specific support measures. In Austria, for example, the capacity to develop housing policies beyond initial reception significantly varies between the selected localities, with the two larger municipalities having more capacity to respond to this challenge. This greater capacity to respond depends not only on local authorities but also on a wider range of institutions and actors, including a major presence of non-profit organisations that either work together with the municipality or complement its (lack of) policies. On the other hand, in smaller localities contacts are more likely to be direct and personal, which may make finding individual solutions (particularly with regard to housing) easier.

Local politics do also matter in explaining variation across localities. Their role is particularly relevant in the area of housing, with progressive localities more often and more actively involved in facilitating migrants' access to housing. The relationship is somewhat less clear for the area of employment, although also here progressive local authorities tend to have closer ties with NGOs and civil society organisations. However, presumably because labour market integration and therefore participation in specific employment and training programs can be framed as a duty for welfare recipients (and especially newcomers), local measures in the field of employment are also common in conservative-led localities. For instance, in a Swedish conservative locality active labour integration, civic orientation courses and progress in language attainment are part of a locally specific "integration duty", which is a precondition for migrants' access to income support.

Cultural diversity, linked to the level of previous immigration, does not seem to be particularly relevant in explaining the comprehensiveness of local policies or other (private) initiatives. In contrast, as said above, cultural diversity does seem to enhance the role of informal networks of co-ethnic that may facilitate finding housing and employment. It may also help to reduce residents' suspicion and ambiguous attitudes towards newcomers with a different cultural background. Finally, **structural conditions** seem to matter only for housing, with economically thriving municipalities having more resources to fund (if considered) dedicated personnel. For the rest, structural conditions are a key factor in shaping the context (and thus post-2014 migrants' conditions for accessing the housing and labour markets) but not in explaining local responses to it.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

a) **European level**
- Employers all over the continent lament their increasing inability to find workers in a historically tight labour market. Accordingly to a recently published report by the European Labour Authority (2021), shortages are ubiquitous, meaning that they have to be covered in situ and therefore cannot be met with surpluses across frontiers. In consequence, member states are considering relaxed visa requirements for foreign workers, and have agreed upon more attractive and flexible conditions for the entry and residence of highly skilled workers from outside the EU. However, as shown by Whole-COMM WP4, severe housing crises limit EU countries' capacity to receive and accommodate them. Therefore, **any migration policy meant to expand the workforce**

by recruiting foreign labour should include considerations about reception capabilities and, when needed, be accompanied by specific social policies (targeted or not) to facilitate migrants' accommodation and integration.

- Accommodation and long-term integration are key not only to guarantee migrants and refugees' material conditions (as stated in the [EU Directive](#) on asylum seekers' reception conditions) but also to put the basis for good community relations, which is key to enhance social cohesion and prevent the emergence or consolidation of anti-immigrant discourses. This is of particular importance in the current European context, characterized by multiple crises and with an increasing limitation of rights for newcomers (including asylum seekers) as part and parcel of a migratory policy meant to have a deterrent effect on potential migrants. Therefore, **discussions around the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum should include not only specific proposals on how to regulate migration but also considerations about migrants and refugees' reception and integration conditions.**

- Small and medium-sized towns and rural areas (SMsTRA) across Europe carry a significant share of the responsibility for welcoming migrants and refugees. Therefore, **also smaller municipalities should be invited to participate in deliberative fora and networks in European policymaking on integration and be informed about support measures and funding that is available to them on the European level**. Moreover, given the singularity of integration processes and policies in SMsTRA, **support measures should be adapted to their specific needs and constraints, including potential barriers in accessing EU funding.**

b) National level

- Immigration is not unique to big cities. In countries such as Italy and Spain, immigration has been as well a rural phenomenon linked to specific labour shortages (also produced by very precarious labour conditions) in the agricultural and care sectors. Since 2014 the arrival of an unprecedented number of asylum seekers and refugees has led several member states to decentralise reception facilities and redistribute asylum seekers across the national territory, either directly through a redistribution quota or by opening additional reception places in more peripheric places. **These direct or indirect redistribution policies should take into account the specific reception capabilities of SMsTRA**. As shown by Whole-COMM WP4, post-2014 migrants' access to housing and employment is particularly shaped by local structural factors. In particular, favourable local economic conditions tend to make it more difficult for migrants to find a place to live but play in favour of their access to employment.

- **Direct or indirect redistribution policies should also be accompanied by support measures to address the specific needs of SMsTRA.** Whole-COMM's WP4 shows that the locality size is a key explanatory factor in explaining variation in local responses. On the one hand, bigger localities have more knowledge, capacity, and resources to intervene and set up specific support measures. On the other hand, in smaller localities contacts are more likely to be direct and personal. National policies should take these differences into account in order to ensure that migrants and refugees receive similar reception conditions and opportunities to integration across different local contexts.

- Whole-COMM WP4 shows that exclusionary policies (defined mostly at the national level) are equally and sometimes even more relevant than those aiming to facilitate access. These include immigration and asylum laws and social and labour policies. Therefore, **national governments should consider not only how to improve reception and integration but also how to minimize institutional exclusion**, for instance by ensuring equal access to social housing or facilitating access (e.g., in terms of work permits, homologation of titles, training and language courses) to the labour market.

- Given their increasing role in migrants and refugees' reception and integration, **SMsTRA should be included in national deliberative fora and structures of multilevel governance. National support measures should be adapted to their specific needs and constraints**, taking into account their more limited resources and number of actors involved and including as well potential barriers in accessing national funding.

c) **Local level**

- Post-2014 migrants' access to housing and employment in SMsTRA is shaped by structural, policy and societal factors**. Therefore, **any local policy aimed to improve post-2014 migrants' conditions should address each of these factors**. As for the structural factors, **local authorities should work to ensure post-2014 migrants' access to affordable and dignified housing and together with employers and other local actors (e.g., NGOs, local association, etc) work on their employability**.

- As for the policy factors, local policies alone are not enough to change the conditions of post-2014 migrants' access to housing and employment. In order to be effective, **local policies should be put in line with regional and national laws and policies**. Therefore, local authorities should push to be present in multilevel decision-making structures and their voices and needs to be heard at the regional and national levels.

- As for the societal factors, Whole-COMM findings confirm previous research that highlighted the key role of informal networks in facilitating immigrants' accommodation and long-term integration. Therefore**, local authorities should support civil society actors and promote formal and informal bonds with local residents**, e.g., through community sponsorship schemes, mentorship or buddy programmes, promoting relations with volunteers and people of similar age groups or traineeships that bring together potential employees and employers.

- Discrimination was mentioned by most interviewees in almost all localities across the eight selected countries. Therefore, **local authorities (regardless of the locality size) should develop specific measures to denounce and prevent discrimination practices, with a particular focus on the (private) housing sector**.

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PROJECT IDENTITY

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