

Integration of refugees and migrants: Participation in cultural activities

Over the past two years, the European Union has received people fleeing conflict zones outside of Europe on a scale unprecedented for Europe since World War II. In the multi-faceted challenge of integrating new arrivals, cultural aspects are also part of the solution.

Refugees and migrants – challenges and benefits of integration

The [United Nations Refugee Agency \(UNHCR\)](#), the body specialised in refugees' protection, defines refugees as persons who flee their countries because of armed conflicts or persecution, seeking to obtain asylum status that will protect them, whereas migrants look for a better life through finding work, and in some cases for education or family reunion. According to the [International Organization for Migration \(IOM\)](#), over a million persons have arrived in Europe since January 2015, many of them fleeing conflict zones in Syria and Iraq.

Their integration into host societies may pose difficulties due to the scale of the phenomenon. It depends also on the level of preparedness of local communities for the process. The war trauma experienced by refugees in their home countries is another challenge to address. Even though the process may be difficult, successful integration of refugees and migrants can enable them to contribute to their host countries, as testified on the UNHCR website's list of some [prominent](#) refugees.

Integration and culture

The 2002 UNHCR publication, 'Refugee Resettlement – An International Handbook to [Guide Reception and Integration](#)', describes [refugees' integration](#) as a 'mutual, dynamic, multi-faceted and on-going process'. It involves 'the conditions for and actual participation in all aspects of the economic, social, cultural, civil and political life' of the host country. The handbook stressed the importance of the [recognition](#) of refugees' culture for their integration and contribution to multicultural society. Similarly, a 2013 Committee of the Regions' [study](#) on third-country nationals' integration discussed socioeconomic, legal and cultural aspects of integration, and pointed to the recognition of migrants' culture as an integration factor.

Legal framework

The 1966 United Nations International [Covenant of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#) granted all men and women equal rights to enjoy such rights (Article 3) and to take part in cultural life (Article 15(1)a). States parties to the Covenant shall create conditions for everyone to benefit from them. In the European Union (EU), Article 22 of the [Charter of Fundamental Rights](#) of the EU provides for the respect of cultural diversity.

According to [Article 79\(4\)](#) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), integration policy is primarily a national competence. The role of the EU is to support national measures through [funding](#) and guidelines on good practices. On the basis of [Articles 6](#) and [167](#) TFEU, the EU plays the same supporting role in respect of cultural policies of Member States and consequently their cultural integration policies.

European Union institutions on the role of culture in integration

In [common basic principles](#) for immigration integration policy in the EU (CBP), the November 2004 meeting of the Justice and Home Affairs Council stressed that successful integration on migrants by individual Member States was in the common interest of the European Union. It listed recommended actions in this area, such as shared forums, inter-cultural dialogue and education about immigrant cultures, which enhance interaction between immigrants and Member State citizens and promote mutual understanding. The following year, the European Commission adopted the [communication](#), 'A common agenda for integration - Framework for the integration of third-country nationals in the European Union' to facilitate implementation of the CBP.



It suggested actions and pilot projects increasing immigrants' cultural participation, and contacts between migrants and host society through cultural activities.

The [first edition](#) of the Commission's Handbook on Integration for policy-makers and practitioners suggested introducing [integration indicators](#) on its socioeconomic, cultural, civil and political dimensions. Its [third edition](#) developed the cultural dimension. It highlighted the [role of arts](#) and culture in giving a voice to migrants and refugees, in discussing differences among populations, or as a work opportunity.

Since many migrants settle in urban areas, the renewed [European Agenda](#) for Integration of 2011 stressed the role of local communities in stimulating migrants' participation in cultural activities, thus contributing to social cohesion, particularly in disadvantaged urban areas. The 2016 Commission [Action plan](#) on the integration of third country nationals' stressed participation in cultural life as an important factor in creating a sense of belonging to the host society, a process of informal learning, and mutual understanding. The Commission recommended EU financial support to cultural diversity projects through arts and culture.

The European Parliament adopted a [resolution](#) on a common immigration policy for Europe in 2009, supporting migrants' cultural integration as a process covering country of origin and host country cultures, and another [resolution](#), in January 2016, encouraged artistic education for all, including migrants, and their participation in cultural life and decisions in this domain, together with host communities. The resolution also called on Member States to involve migrants in local cultural life.

EU projects in the framework of integration through culture

The [Manual](#) of artistic tools for migrants 'Art of adaptation', published in 2012, resulted from the [Ariadne project](#), supported by the EU's Lifelong Learning programme. It researched the role of art in the adaptation process, analysed positive impacts of art and creative activities on the ability to adapt, to change, and as a therapeutic tool to address trauma in one's personal development. This approach mirrors the needs of refugees who flee war zones and whose [cultural identity](#) has been undermined.

In June 2016, the Commission held a [structured dialogue](#) with organisations working at local level in the area of culture, on the role of culture in promoting the inclusion of refugees and migrants. The resulting [report](#) points to an urgent need to find strategies allowing large numbers of refugees fleeing conflict and war zones to be included in European societies while preserving their cultural roots and identity. It focuses on culture as a factor in helping refugees to recover from trauma, develop their skills, and feel empowered, as well as contributing to conflict resolution and prevention, and mutual understanding. It underlines that smaller local projects of cultural expression could have greater impact and result in more people-to-people contacts.

The impact of cultural actions is difficult to assess, while the creative process itself can bring change through co-creation and co-production. The process is as important as the outcome and could also inform the development of integration policy in other fields (such as education and housing). The report recommends establishing a new EU funding programme, especially for local authorities, including those in rural and remote areas, to finance 'spaces of welcome' for refugees. Such safe spaces projects should be implemented swiftly and culturally engage local and refugee communities, allowing them to explore identity issues and promote inclusion. By supporting art and culture projects involving the whole community, the EU will help build bridges between people and strengthen democracy. The report stresses the need for a wider cultural strategy to develop an open and equal dialogue between newcomers and their host cultures, so that both communities share the task of integration.

Financial support for cultural integration of refugees and migrants

[Regulation \(EU\) No 516/2014](#) establishing the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund provides support for Member States' action: over the 2014-2020 period, €385 million of its €3.1 billion budget is assigned to funding grants and other direct actions. The fund will provide €9.5 million in 2017 for [integration of third-country nationals](#) projects, including for their participation in cultural life.

The [Europe for Citizens](#) programme also offers funding for cultural integration projects involving both migrant and host populations, such as [the City Ghettos of Today](#) project for countering the stigmatisation of migrants.

The [Creative Europe](#) programme has allocated €2.5 million for [12 projects](#) on refugee cultural [integration](#) starting in September 2016. Theatre, music and storytelling productions running for a maximum 24 months will allow refugees to express themselves, EU citizens and refugees to get to know their respective cultures, and co-create. Available EU, national or private funding is listed on the European Commission's [website](#).