

Labour market integration of asylum-seekers and refugees

SUMMARY

Migration to the European Union from third countries has been substantial over the past few decades, as Europe has historically been considered a continent of relative economic prosperity and political stability. While many foreign-born individuals arrive in the European Union (EU) to work, pursue studies or join family members, the EU also receives a large number of asylum-seekers and refugees, not least in the context of the war in Ukraine since February 2022. As host societies, EU Member States are required to facilitate the integration of migrants, i.e. their acceptance in society and ability to access different services and the labour market.

EU law envisages access to employment for refugees as soon as they are granted refugee status, or for asylum-seekers at the latest within nine months of lodging an asylum application. Ukrainians can rely on immediate protection upon registering for temporary protection in one of the EU Member States. However, employment rates for migrants in general, and refugees and asylum-seekers in particular, are persistently lower than those of native-born population. Moreover, they are more likely to be employed in low-skilled occupations that have high automation potential in the future. If this potential is exploited through the use of artificial intelligence and digitalisation, the European economy is expected to see a decline in low-skilled employment.

To ensure that migrants' skills will match the future EU labour market and fill its gaps, focus should be turned to facilitating the proper recognition of their qualifications, as well as to upgrading their education and skills as needed. The EU supports Member States' integration efforts through its EU action plan on integration and inclusion. In addition, the European Commission is launching a new EU 'talent pool' platform in summer 2022.

This Briefing updates and expands a previous edition, from June 2021.



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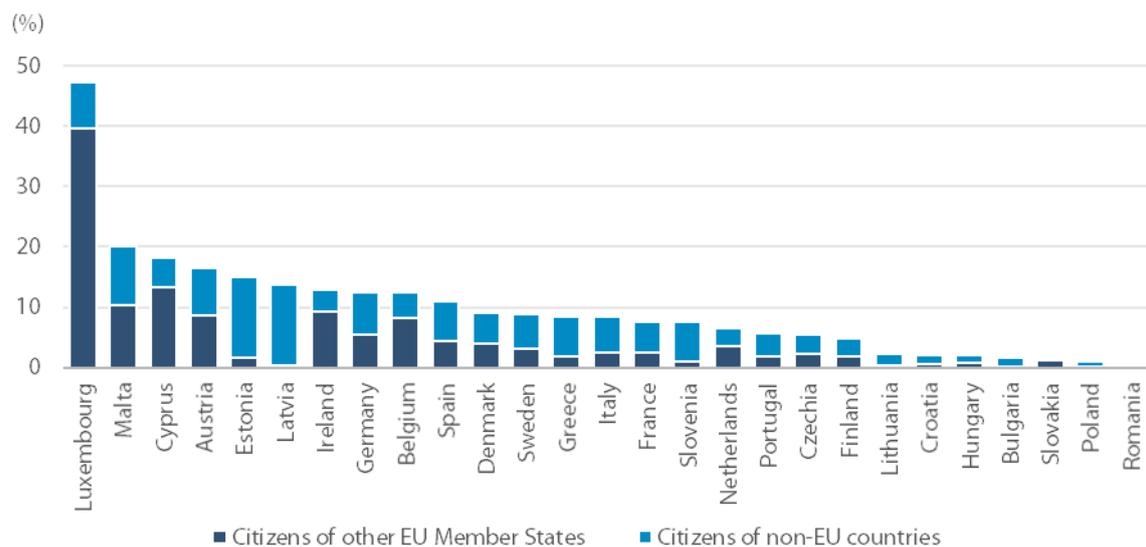
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Context

Migration to Europe from third countries has been substantial over the past decades, and has a significant role in shaping the demographics of the European Union and the individual Member States. Historically, the main pull factors to Europe are [considered](#) to be the relative economic prosperity and political stability of the EU. Between 1960 and 2018, the population of the EU increased by 106 million people, growing from 407 million to 513 million. According to [Eurostat](#), on 1 January 2021, the number of people living in the EU was 447.2 million, of whom 23.7 million (5.3 %) were non-EU citizens. Meanwhile, some 13.7 million EU citizens were living in another EU Member State. In relative terms, the highest share of non-nationals among EU countries on 1 January 2021 was in Luxembourg, where they accounted for 47.1 % of the total population. A high proportion of third-country nationals (above 10 % of the resident population) was also reported in Malta, Cyprus, Austria, Estonia, Latvia, Ireland, Germany, Belgium and Spain, whereas the lowest share was observed in Romania (less than 1 % of the population).

Figure 1 – Share of non-nationals in the resident population, 1 January 2020

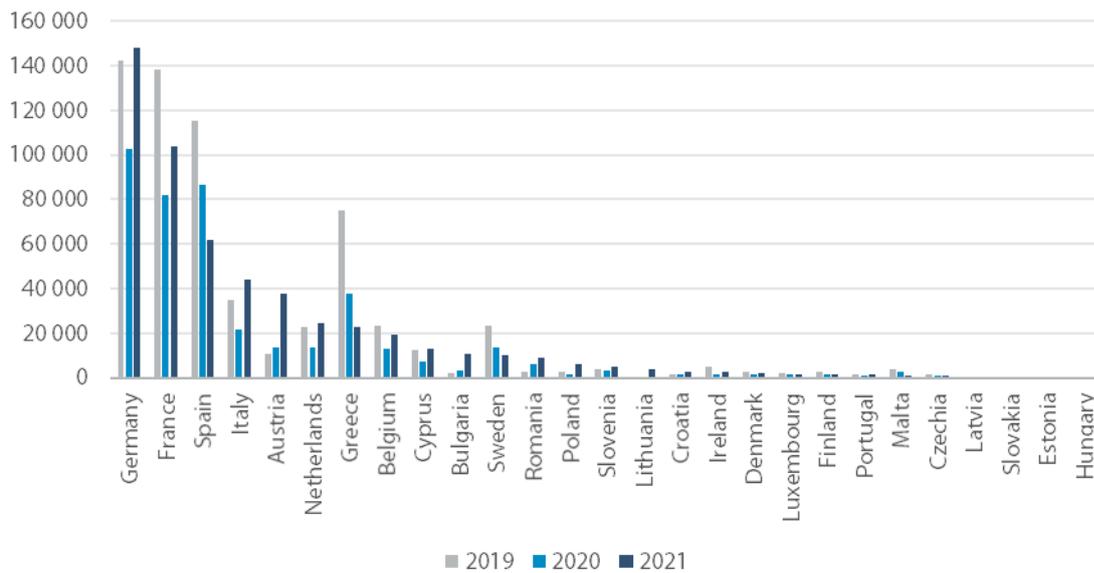


Notes: Provisional data for France and Poland, estimates for Poland and Romania.

Source: Eurostat, online data code: ([migr_pop1ctz](#)).

In addition to legal migration, i.e. people arriving in Europe to work, pursue studies or join family members, the EU faced an unprecedented surge of irregular migration in 2015, with 1.8 million [detections](#) of illegal entries. The flows started to gradually subside in 2016, as a result of combined measures to secure the external border of the EU, and to increase cooperation with third countries along the main migratory routes, such as Turkey, and some African countries. After a further drop in the surge of asylum-seekers during the coronavirus pandemic, asylum-seeker numbers started rising again in 2021. Overall, the number of [first-time asylum applicants](#) registered in 2021 was 535 000 – a 28.3 % increase year-on-year – approaching the level prior to the 2015-2016 migration crisis. Syrians, Afghans and Iraqis accounted for 40 % of all applications lodged, and Germany, France and Spain were the main destination countries.

Figure 2 – Number of first-time asylum applicants (non-EU citizens), 2019-2021



Source: Eurostat ([migr_asyappctza](#)).

Ukrainian refugees

2022 has seen a dramatic increase in numbers of displaced persons following Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. Estimates from the [UNHCR](#) indicate that by June 2022, 4.9 million individual refugees had been recorded across Europe, most of them initially fleeing Ukraine to neighbouring EU countries such as Poland (1.2 million), Romania (90 000), Slovakia (77 300) and Hungary (24 000).

As Ukrainians are one of the largest groups of third-country nationals living in the EU, many seek to reach other Ukrainians already living in EU Member States. The largest [Ukrainian diaspora](#) exists in Poland, where between 2015 and 2019 around 51 % of all Ukrainians settled upon arrival in the EU. Data also shows that over 80 % of the annual new arrivals settle in the five EU Member States that host 80 % of the Ukrainian diaspora in the EU, namely Poland, Italy, Czechia, Germany and Spain.

The EU Agency for Asylum (EAAA) [reports](#) that asylum applications lodged by Ukrainians in March 2022 reached a record number of 14 000, and that there was a parallel increase in asylum applications by people from former Soviet Union countries, such as Russia, Belarus, Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. However, weekly inflows have declined in the past two months, as many Ukrainians have returned to their country. By 9 June 2022, 2.3 million Ukrainians had [crossed](#) the border into Ukraine, although this trend is likely to reflect back-and-forth movements.

The EU moved swiftly to offer political, financial and humanitarian [assistance to Ukraine](#) and its residents within and outside the country's borders. However, some of the main host countries are struggling to cope with the sheer scale of the refugee influx. On 3 May 2022, 10 Member States (Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Slovakia) addressed a [joint statement](#) to the European Commission, asking for additional funding and more flexible spending rules to be able to cope with the high number of newcomers. Indeed, those countries with a high number of refugees and asylum-seekers not only need to organise their reception and access to services, such as housing, language courses and healthcare, but must also make more effort to promote their integration into their societies and local labour markets.

The potential for integration

Not merely [difficult to define](#) and measure, integration is also a complex and long-term process that cuts across different policy areas and aspects of migrants' lives. It is necessarily a two-way process of adaptation for both migrants and host societies. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) [emphasises](#) the related concepts of social inclusion and social cohesion in this context. While the first refers to migrants' full economic, social, cultural and political participation in the host society, the latter concerns phenomena such as anti-discrimination, fighting xenophobia and reaching mutual understanding and acceptance.

When it comes to monitoring integration, this is not a straightforward exercise either and one that is not always carried out at national level, as observed in the European Migration Network (EMN) [ad-hoc query](#) from 2018. Out of 20 respondents, 17 indicated that they carried out some form of regular monitoring reports relating to migrant integration, varying in frequency from yearly to every four years. Sometimes these reports were more an evaluation of tools, or national action plans or policies, and did not as such monitor particular developments in migrant integration.

While integration can prove challenging, it can also be seen as an [opportunity](#) for the EU. From an economic point of view, migration flows have been [observed](#) to contribute to the labour market of their host society through:

- filling gaps in low and high-skilled occupations;
- addressing labour market imbalances;
- contributing more in taxes or benefits than they receive;
- spurring innovation and, thereby, economic growth.

This potential is all the more important in the context of an ageing society, as demonstrated by the [EPRS study](#) on the Demographic Outlook for the European Union 2022. According to the European Commission's [projections](#), the European labour force (aged 20-64 years) is expected to decline by 8.2 % (or by around 19 million people) between 2023 and 2060. This shrinking working age population has to [sustain pension](#) and healthcare services for a rapidly growing number of pensioners. Moreover, a predominantly older workforce might translate into a deficit of the new skills required for innovation, alongside serious labour shortages and great difficulties in [sustaining European welfare states](#). While the share of third-country nationals legally residing in EU Member States is not high – 23.7 million or 5.3 % of the EU-27 population of 447.2 million inhabitants in 2021, based on [Eurostat data](#), they tend to be younger and more mobile than EU nationals.

A [joint publication](#) by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the European Commission reports that around 80 % of foreign-born residents in the EU are of working age (15-64 year-olds), as compared with two-thirds of the native-born population. As regards [asylum applicants](#), in 2021, 183 600 people seeking asylum were under 18 years old, and nearly 13 % (23 200) were unaccompanied children. Most unaccompanied children came from Afghanistan, Syria and Bangladesh. If these people are successfully included in European host societies and labour markets, migration could be an important tool to enhance the sustainability of EU countries' welfare systems and to ensure the sustainable growth of the EU economy.

For Ukrainian refugees, the integration situation may be different, as many hope to return to their country as soon as possible. By 13 June 2022, the number of [Ukrainians entering Ukraine](#) reached 2.3 million, but this figure reflects only cross-border movements and does not necessarily indicate permanent returns as the situation across Ukraine remains highly unpredictable.

The right to work

An important aspect of facilitating the integration of asylum-seekers and refugees is their entry into employment. Under EU law, Member States are required to provide access to the labour market to **beneficiaries of international protection** (Article 26 of the [Qualification Directive](#)) immediately

after the refugee status or subsidiary protection has been granted. Moreover, Member States are required to provide certain other services, such as language and vocational courses, and facilitate the recognition of refugees' qualifications. The European Council of Refugees and Exiles [points out](#) that this is essential to helping beneficiaries of international protection find and maintain employment appropriate to their profile (and not just state subsidised and/or low-skilled jobs).

However, the situation of **asylum-seekers** is regulated under Article 15 of the [Reception Conditions Directive](#), which leaves the conditions for asylum-seekers' access to the labour market at Member States' discretion, along with an option to prioritise citizens from the European Union and the European Economic Area (EEA), as well as legally resident third-country nationals. Although regulated under national law, EU law sets an obligation to grant an effective access to asylum-seekers within nine months from lodging an asylum application. As a result, the access delays vary from country to country at between one and nine months.

These two instruments do not apply to Ireland and Denmark, who decided to opt out of the recast second-phase legislation. Until 2018, Ireland applied only the [first-phase Qualification Directive](#) (2004) and under national law did not allow asylum-seekers to enter the labour market. Nevertheless, on 6 July 2018, Ireland [opted in](#) to the recast Reception Conditions Directive and transposed it into its national law through the [European Communities \(Reception Conditions\) Regulations 2018](#). The reform aligned the Irish national system with EU law in this area, allowing asylum-seekers' access to employment if they do not receive their asylum decision within nine months of lodging the application. In Denmark, asylum applicants can seek permission to work six months after lodging an application for international protection. They must enter into a contract with the Immigration Service that verifies that they meet a set of [conditions](#) (the applicant is aged over 18 years, their identity is established and the application process is still in process, the employment complies with standard salary and employment terms, etc.).

Pending legislative proposals

Although national asylum rules are more harmonised since 2013, differences in approach persist across the EU, as evidenced in Table 1 below. This can lead asylum-seekers to apply for international protection in Member States whose asylum systems appear to be more generous. To ensure more equal treatment of asylum-seekers, on 13 July 2016, the European Commission proposed to replace the Qualification Directive with a directly-applicable [regulation](#), and to [recast](#) the Reception Conditions Directive. In the specific case of asylum-seekers, for example, the time limit for access to the labour market in the new proposed directive has been reduced from nine to six months from lodging the application (Article 15(1)(1)). However, the outcome of these two legislative proposals as part of the wider [asylum reform package](#) is currently uncertain, as consensus has not been found in the Council. In September 2020, the Commission presented a [new pact](#) on migration and asylum, but left the proposals on the Qualification Directive and the Reception Conditions Directive unchanged. The Commission has [expressed](#) its wish for the co-legislators to adopt their positions on the asylum files, but as these files are interlinked, work across the different legislative proposals is likely to make the process last longer.

Temporary Protection Directive

The legal framework has been different for Ukrainian refugees fleeing the country since 24 February 2022. One of the main tools for fast reception and integration of Ukrainian refugees is the Council decision of 4 March 2022 activating the Temporary Protection Directive ([Council Directive 2001/55/EC](#)). Since then, [EU+ countries](#) (EU Member States and Iceland, Norway and Switzerland) have been adopting the necessary national legislation to ensure adequate implementation, configuring electronic systems and gradually reporting to the EUAA.

The [Temporary Protection Directive](#) applies in all EU Member States, except Denmark, which has nevertheless adopted similar national measures. Non-EU Schengen states – Iceland, Liechtenstein,

Norway and Switzerland – that are not bound by the directive may apply similar national provisions. Following the Council implementing decision of 4 March 2022, EU Member States have been enacting legislative measures to enable the activation of temporary protection at national level and ensure immediate support for Ukrainian civilians. The Council decision envisages temporary protection for Ukrainian nationals residing in Ukraine before 24 February 2022, as well as for certain categories of nationals of other third countries and stateless persons who were previously residing in Ukraine.

Member States must permit temporary protection beneficiaries to take up employment or self-employment, but they may give priority to EU citizens and EEA nationals, as well as legally resident third-country nationals receiving unemployment benefit. The national law regarding remuneration, social security, and other conditions of employment in each Member State applies.

As for social welfare and housing, Member States must 'ensure that persons enjoying temporary protection have access to suitable accommodation or, if necessary, receive the means to obtain housing', and 'shall make provision for persons enjoying temporary protection to receive necessary assistance in terms of social welfare and means of subsistence, if they do not have sufficient resources, as well as for medical care' – which 'shall include at least emergency care and essential treatment of illness'. There is also an obligation to 'provide necessary medical or other assistance to persons enjoying temporary protection who have special needs, such as unaccompanied minors or persons who have undergone torture, rape or other serious forms of psychological, physical or sexual violence'.

For education, Member States must give 'access to the education system under the same conditions as nationals of the host Member State' for those under 18, but may confine this to the state education system. Admission of adults to the general education system is optional.

Employment of migrants

Migrant employment rates in the EU still leave room for improvement. Comparing third-country nationals and EU nationals, the OECD and the European Commission [study](#) indicates that third-country nationals systematically record lower activity rates than EU nationals. Eurostat [data](#) indicate that in 2020, the average employment rate in the working age population (aged 20 to 64 years) of EU citizens was 73.1 %, whereas the rate was 57.5 % for working age non-EU citizens. The wide employment gap between native-born and non-EU citizens is especially pronounced in most Nordic countries and in [long-standing immigration destinations](#) in the EU. Research also consistently shows that migrant women face a [double barrier](#) to employment, both as migrants and as women.

The gap increases further in the case of refugees. Based on a labour force [survey](#) published by the European Commission and OECD in 2016, refugees are one of the most vulnerable groups of migrants on the labour market. Data indicate that among economically active refugees, 1 in 5 is unemployed and 1 in 8 is unemployed for over a year or longer. The study observes that it takes refugees on average up to 20 years to reach an employment rate similar to that of the native-born population. Comparing refugees with other migrants, their different employment rates can be explained by their differing education levels. That being said, the education level of refugees also varies between countries of origin. A 2018 [study](#) commissioned by the European Parliament, comparing refugee integration in Austria, Germany and Sweden, takes note that while the majority of asylum-seekers from Syria, Iran and Iraq have at least an upper secondary education, most of those from Afghanistan, Eritrea and Somalia have a lower secondary education at most.

On the other hand, a [CEPS working paper](#) demonstrated that the 2014-2017 asylum surge towards the EU was mostly homogenous, as young, low-skilled men accounted for over one third of arrivals. The authors noted that young, low-skilled men already represent an economically vulnerable group, and suggest that this vulnerability can be further increased and bring about anti-immigrant sentiment, which is detrimental to the integration outlook for refugees. However, the study concluded that the impact of refugees' entry into the labour market is not economically significant,

as even in Sweden, the country with the highest rate of asylum-seekers per million inhabitants over 2014-2017, the share of refugees among the employed population was only around 2 %. In the EU as a whole, the [share of refugees](#) is a mere 0.6 % compared to its total population.

Nevertheless, third-country nationals are [more likely](#) to be employed in occupations with high automation potential. As confirmed by the OECD and Commission study, in all EU Member States except Ireland and Hungary, non-EU born migrants are more likely to have an elementary level occupation than EU-born citizens. Migrants occupy over one in four low-skilled jobs in the EU, surpassing 40 % in countries such as Austria, Germany, and Sweden, and even 60 % in Luxembourg. Migrants also tend to be over- or under-represented in some specific economic sectors, as evidenced in the two tables below.

Table 1 – Over-representation of non-EU citizens in certain economic sectors in 2020

Sector	Overall employment of non-EU citizens	Overall employment of EU citizens
Accommodation and food service activities	11.4 %	3.8 %
Administrative and support activities	7.1 %	3.7 %
Domestic work	6.5 %	0.7 %
Construction	8.6 %	6.4 %

Source: [Statistics on migration to Europe](#), European Commission.

Table 2 – Under-representation of non-EU citizens in certain economic sectors in 2020

Sector	Overall employment of non-EU citizens	Overall employment of EU citizens
Public administration and defence, compulsory social security	1.2 %	7.5 %
Education	3.7 %	7.6 %
Human health and social work activities	7.6 %	10.9 %
Financial and insurance activities	1.1 %	2.8 %

Source: [Statistics on migration to Europe](#), European Commission.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) [reports](#) that migrant workers all over the world, not just the EU, suffered worst from the economic shock of the Covid-19 pandemic, essentially because many of them were employed in precarious low-wage sectors or exactly the sectors worst affected by the pandemic, such as accommodation and food services.

In general, the European economy is also expected to see a decline in low-skilled categories of employment. Automation, artificial intelligence and digitalisation are areas where Europe has a significant under-exploited opportunity. Research [estimates](#) that, in 2017, Europe had captured just 12 % of its potential from digital technologies. The [European Innovation Scoreboard 2021](#), however, indicates that the EU's innovation performance has increased by 12.5 % since 2014. There is continued convergence within the EU, with lower-performing countries growing faster than higher-performing ones, therefore closing the innovation gap between them. The [digital transition](#) was further accelerated by the pandemic, as social distancing measures favoured automation and digitalisation, as well as increased use of e-government, and led to higher rates of remote working.

If the digitalisation and innovation potential is untapped, it might rather generate employment for skilled workers and as a result, migrants may not necessarily have the skills profile that the knowledge economy will need. Therefore, upgrading their education and skills seems a [necessary](#) prerequisite for their future employment in Europe. One of the factors that increases employment prospects significantly is language training. Training, including free language courses and upgrading skills, already forms an essential part of integration programmes in many countries. In parallel, the initiative can come from the refugees themselves. A longitudinal [study](#) of refugees in Germany [showed](#) that 68 % of young refugees were hoping to complete vocational training or university studies in 2017.

However, many challenges continue to hamper the labour market integration of asylum-seekers and refugees. A 2017 EUROCITIES [report](#) on labour market integration of refugees and asylum-seekers carried out in 19 cities in 12 EU Member States lists five key challenges identified by the cities. Besides the lack of language skills, cities mentioned barriers such as a lack of education, skills and professional experience; legal status; lengthy procedures for granting legal status or a work permit; and recognition of qualifications. The results of the survey also pointed to women refugees' needing special efforts for their inclusion. Young refugees and asylum-seekers were seen as the second most disadvantaged group, requiring more attention in local, national and EU level policy measures.

Moreover, while all EU countries have anti-discrimination laws in place that, in line with EU legislation, such as the [Racial Equality Directive](#), forbid discrimination in the employment context based on race, nationality and/or ethnicity, the enforcement of these laws is uneven in the EU. To help overcome this obstacle, the Commission launched an initiative, [Employers together for integration](#), in 2017, to highlight the role of employers in the integration of migrants, including asylum-seekers and refugees. Employers are [invited](#) to join the initiative and describe their current or future action to improve migrants' labour market integration.

Regarding Ukrainians' access to the labour market, Eurofound [reports](#) that several companies in Ukraine's neighbouring countries have expressed their support for the refugees, announcing that they would create new jobs specifically for Ukrainians to allow them to settle at least temporarily in their new home. At the same time, companies will be facing repercussions on employment in general due to the economic sanctions imposed on Russia, disrupted supply chains and resource flows, and inflation, as an inevitable consequence.

In Germany, where the shortage of skilled labour may soon affect productivity, Ukrainian refugees are in high demand to fill the gaps in the labour market. [According](#) to the Minister for Education and Research, Bettina Stark-Watzinger, 73 % of refugees from Ukraine have completed their studies, and 10 % speak good German. For them to be employed according to their qualifications, it is important to speed up recognition of their qualifications and ensure that Ukrainian refugees do not end up being exploited as cheap labour in Germany.

EU framework for labour market integration

Labour market participation forms part of a wider integration process, whereby third-country nationals legally residing in the EU may access not only employment, but also education and administrative goods and services. While mostly pertaining to the national as well as regional and local levels, this topic has gained importance on the EU political agenda in recent years, as policy-makers have come to acknowledge that the economic, social, cultural and civic participation of migrants in European host societies is essential to overcome challenges and benefit from the opportunities of migration. EU Member States' cooperation in this area was defined in the [Common Basic Principles for Immigrant Integration Policy](#), adopted in 2004 and reaffirmed in 2014. The principles address integration as a 'dynamic, two-way process of mutual accommodation' by migrants as well as EU nationals.

To set out concrete actions in this area, the Commission proposed a [European agenda for the integration of third-country nationals](#) in July 2011. It emphasises local action that can help harness the potential of migration and diversity. The agenda was complemented in June 2016 by an [action plan on the integration of third-country nationals](#), which provides a framework for Member States' integration efforts, and details the measures taken by the Commission for every key policy priority. The action plan aims to support different actors involved in the integration effort, namely the governments of Member States, local and regional authorities, social partners and civil society. While the target group of the action plan includes all third-country nationals in the EU, it also contains provisions specifically addressing refugees, such as pre-departure and pre-arrival measures; education, including language training; access to basic services such as housing and healthcare; employment and vocational training. In a European Migration Network [ad-hoc query](#) on the content of integration programmes for asylum-seekers and refugees, the majority of Member States noted that acquiring the language of the host society is prioritised in their integration policies. Others mentioned integration in the labour market or access to housing as key priorities. Many pointed out that integration measures cannot be viewed as separate priorities but as a whole approach geared towards accommodating the specific situation of persons with differing needs, backgrounds, qualifications and skills.

In November 2020, the Commission presented a new [EU action plan on integration and inclusion](#) (2021-2027), building on the former action plan. Some of the new elements include expanding its scope to EU citizens of migrant background, enhancing migrant participation, gender mainstreaming, closer cooperation with local and regional authorities and fostering long-term integration.

On 27 April 2022, as part of its [legal migration package](#), the Commission launched its 'EU talent pool' project, the first EU-wide platform and matching tool to attract non-EU nationals to the EU labour market and help employers find the talent they need. Especially regarding the urgent need to facilitate access to the labour market for Ukrainian refugees, the Commission is proposing a pilot initiative that should be up and running by summer 2022. The new platform would allow people to make a single application for work and residence in the EU, thus making the process simpler for both employees and employers. The procedure also allows requests to be made from non-EU countries or from EU Member States.

The role of local and regional authorities

Local and regional authorities are the main facilitators of integration and social cohesion. As cities have long been an attractive destination for migrants, they have an important role to play in creating inclusive communities, helping overcome negative public perceptions and promoting diversity. Especially in the context of welcoming asylum-seekers and refugees, it is [suggested](#) that successful policies will both ensure an appropriate welcome to the migrants and make sure that the host society's services are adapted to a more diverse population.

The [Cities and Regions for Integration](#) initiative launched by the Committee of the Regions in 2019, creates a political platform for sharing best practices on integration of migrants and refugees, promoting inclusivity and diversity and ensuring social cohesion. One of the missions of this initiative is also to offer a strong narrative of solidarity which could help counter disinformation on this topic. Examples of good practices would also be gathered on the [European website on integration](#).

As regards the territorial impact of the arrival of migrants, a [study](#) published by the European Committee of the Regions (CoR) points out that the pandemic worsened the situation of displaced persons, as it magnified existing problems and created new ones. Regions and cities in the frontline Member States, as the main actors for reception and integration of migrants were running out of resources, not least since the principle of burden-sharing was and remains blocked among Member States. This forced regions to find innovative solutions to manage the migrant flows.

One of the main challenges has been providing housing for newcomers, especially during the period of implementation of national quarantines in response to the pandemic in 2020 and 2021. Integration policies also suffered, as it became more difficult to provide information and social services as well as access to education. The CoR study recommends further promoting the use of EU funds for reception and integration policies at local and regional level. Easier access would offer more flexibility and timeliness when responding to protection needs. It also notes that migrants can help to fill labour market gaps and shortages, not only in the tourism and hospitality sector, which is only now starting to get back on its feet. Tapping into the potential offered by migrants, many of whom are highly skilled, would offer the labour market a valuable source and could also be a welcome demographic addition in sparsely populated areas. For this, migrants should be able to benefit from language courses, have their qualifications recognised and receive a work permit.

In March 2021, to help with the challenges and adjustments, the European Committee of the Regions launched a new [partnership](#) with the European Commission to increase cooperation and support for EU cities, regions and rural areas. The partnership is a follow-up to the 2021-2027 action plan on integration and inclusion.

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