

# **INTERACT – RESEARCHING THIRD COUNTRY NATIONALS’ INTEGRATION AS A THREE-WAY PROCESS - IMMIGRANTS, COUNTRIES OF EMIGRATION AND COUNTRIES OF IMMIGRATION AS ACTORS OF INTEGRATION**

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## ***Latvia’s Integration Policies***

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INTERACT Research Report 2014/17



**INTERACT**  
**Researching Third Country Nationals' Integration as a Three-way Process -**  
**Immigrants, Countries of Emigration and Countries of Immigration as Actors of**  
**Integration**

**Research Report**  
**Country Report**  
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**Latvia's Integration Policies**

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## **INTERACT - Researching Third Country Nationals' Integration as a Three-way Process - Immigrants, Countries of Emigration and Countries of Immigration as Actors of Integration**

Around 25 million persons born in a third country (TCNs) are currently living in the European Union (EU), representing 5% of its total population. Integrating immigrants, i.e. allowing them to participate in the host society at the same level as natives, is an active, not a passive, process that involves two parties, the host society and the immigrants, working together to build a cohesive society.

Policy-making on integration is commonly regarded as primarily a matter of concern for the receiving state, with general disregard for the role of the sending state. However, migrants belong to two places: first, where they come and second, where they now live. While integration takes place in the latter, migrants maintain a variety of links with the former. New means of communication facilitating contact between migrants and their homes, globalisation bringing greater cultural diversity to host countries, and nation-building in source countries seeing expatriate nationals as a strategic resource have all transformed the way migrants interact with their home country.

INTERACT project looks at the ways governments and non-governmental institutions in origin countries, including the media, make transnational bonds a reality, and have developed tools that operate economically (to boost financial transfers and investments); culturally (to maintain or revive cultural heritage); politically (to expand the constituency); legally (to support their rights).

INTERACT project explores several important questions: To what extent do policies pursued by EU member states to integrate immigrants, and policies pursued by governments and non-state actors in origin countries regarding expatriates, complement or contradict each other? What effective contribution do they make to the successful integration of migrants and what obstacles do they put in their way?

A considerable amount of high-quality research on the integration of migrants has been produced in the EU. Building on existing research to investigate the impact of origin countries on the integration of migrants in the host country remains to be done.

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## **Abstract**

This report contributes to the understanding of current integration processes in Latvia. Its main aim is to highlight political and public debate about integration in Latvia, which is currently a low-immigration country. The report aims to identify integration processes for third-country nationals. Besides third-country nationals residing in Latvia, there are also a number of non-residents living in the country, which creates a backdrop for integration issues. The report also aims to recognise the main third-country national groups residing in Latvia and to identify tools for integration measures as well as assessing the success of policy implementation. In addition, it aims to show the main activities that exist for third-country nationals' integration in Latvia as well as to shed light on the mechanisms within integration processes in Latvia. As a result of EU funding, integration activities – both practical and informative – have been successfully implemented and serve as a key tool for local society to cope with third-country national integration.

**Key words:** Latvia, immigration, third-country nationals, integration, NGOs, integration policies

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## Introduction

According to the Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs, there are around 50 thousand third-country nationals registered in Latvia. Third-country nationals comprise around 3 percent of the total population in Latvia. Around 88 percent of all third-country nationals are from CIS countries (Commonwealth of Independent States: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, Uzbekistan) with most from Russia and Ukraine. Half the immigrants in Latvia are working age, around 30 percent are children and youth under 19 years of age and the rest are seniors above 60 years of age. According to the National Integration Centre, the main motives of third-country national immigration in Latvia are family, employment and studies. The Latvian statistical office has registered the dynamics of immigrants from CIS countries and other non-EU countries. In 2004, 5081 persons immigrated to Latvia, in 2008, 3447 persons, but in 2013, 5740.

Integration policy has been a long-term public and political debate. However it concentrates on the current diverse population of Latvia. The integration of third-country nationals has traditionally not played an important role in society, which can be explained by internal issues. Along with European Union project funding and specific activities however, the Ministry of Culture and NGOs have done much work to provide information to Latvian society and practical help to third-country nationals arriving in Latvia. According to the Census in 2011, there were 290,660 non-citizens in Latvia, which comprises 14.1% of all inhabitants, including persons of Russian origin with non-citizen passports. About one third of the Latvian population speaks Russian or another language as their mother tongue. Considerable effort and debate concentrates on the integration of these persons, which would lead to increased naturalisation. In this context, third-country nationals receive only periodic attention in the public space; their topicality rises along with EU funding.

According to immigration-issue researcher Indans (2014), Latvia has not created a persistent strategy to deal with economic migration into and out of Latvia. So far, a bureaucratic regulatory approach towards these issues has been the main tool to deal with migration issues. Despite the fact that the country will soon require a larger workforce due to high emigration numbers, the attitude towards an immigrant workforce and tolerance to third-country nationals is rather low.

The political conflict is discursively maintained mainly on the basis of the language used. Accordingly, Russian speakers in Latvia are the target of political discourse. However, they are not the main target group of integration policy since most are citizens of Latvia. The integration discourse in public space occurs rarely and then the main target groups of the discourse are nationals from third-countries. Latvia, as a small country, is trying to protect its national identity, however, Latvians highly appreciate if a foreign person speaks Latvian and merges with cultural values and traditions.

Integration measures in Latvia concentrate primarily on cultural integration, for example, studying Latvian traditions, showing and sharing cultural aspects from one's country of origin, learning the language (both for children and adults). According to National Integration Centre data, the main industries third-country nationals are employed in are manufacturing, transportation and storage as well as hotels and catering. Some industries such as construction welcome the third-country national workforce; however this work does not always correspond to legal employment.

## **Description of the Integration of Public Policies**

Integration policy instruments are matters dealt with by several institutions in Latvia such as those mentioned in European Commission Country Information Sheet. Since April 2013, the Advisory Council for the Integration of third-country nationals under the Ministry of Culture was created with 18 members. Advisory council members are as follows – the Ministry of Culture, which is the leading ministry working with integration policy implementation in Latvia, as well as:

the Ministry of Interior,  
the Ministry of Education and Science,  
the Ministry of Welfare,  
the Ministry of Health,  
the Ministry of Foreign Affairs,  
the State Chancellery,  
the Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs,  
the Latvian Association of Local and Regional Governments,  
the Riga City Council,  
the Daugavpils City Council,  
the Employers' Confederation of Latvia,  
the Free Trade Union Confederation of Latvia,  
the Union Shelter Safe House,  
the Union Latvian Centre of Human Rights,  
the Union Education Development Centre,  
the Society Education and Innovation Development Centre,  
the Latvian Lithuanian Youth Community.

The main integration policy document in force since 2011 is Guidelines for Integration 2012-2018. Project-based integration activities are also funded through the Society Integration Foundation (SIF). Its main goal is to financially support and promote integration measures for society. SIF is also working with the development of programme-implementation support for public and non-governmental sector projects. The decision-making body of SIF is the Council. The SIF Council encompasses the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Education and Science, Culture, Welfare, Environmental Protection and Regional Development, Justice; a representative of the President of the state; representatives of the Kurzeme, Latgale, Riga, Vidzeme, and Zemgale Planning regions of Latvia, as well as six representatives of non-governmental organizations (Republic of Latvia legislation 2001).

The main entity responsible for integration issues is The National Integration Centre (under the Ministry of Culture) with active websites in three languages (Latvian, Russian and English) and a helpline (+371 80 004 006).

According to the centre, the three main activities they deal with are:

- providing different services to third-country nationals and residing non-citizens;
- coordinating the processes of immigrant integration and ensuring feedback for policy planning;
- promoting, educating and informing local society about immigration issues and creating positive attitudes towards third-country nationals within Latvia.

The main tasks for the centre are consulting in different areas. They deal with legal and social issues, professional development, psychological assistance, language learning and the provision of an interpreter when required.

The National Integration centre supports interaction between different institutions that are working with third-country nationals in Latvia. The main outcomes of the collaboration are educational and consultative seminars for the target group. For policy planning purposes, the National Integration centre is also a secretariat for the National Identity, Civic Society and Integration Policy Guideline Implementation Advisory Board. One of their large tasks is to disseminate topical information on immigration and integration issues for both the local public and third-country nationals. Dissemination events are primarily conferences – both local and international – which include a forum with education and policy planning as the main topics. Besides working with the target group, much media attention is devoted to escalating tolerance and creating a supportive environment for immigrants in Latvian society.

The main activities provided for third-country nationals are admission, employment, housing, health care, education, social security, entrepreneurship support and the provision of general information about Latvia. There is no comprehensive system established for other migrant groups. There are project-based language courses funded from the Solidarity and Management of Migration Flows programme but these are not provided continuously on regular basis. If a third-country national wants to apply for permanent residence, he/she has to prove basic knowledge of Latvian. Within the framework of the Society Integration Foundation project “National Integration Centre,” third-country nationals “in all the regions of Latvia are offered a possibility to learn the Latvian language up to level B2 according to individual skills. The training course is free of charge” (National Integration Centre 2013c). However, language learning for immigrant children within the education system is one’s own responsibility.

There are no policy tools that are relevant to third-country nationals before their departure from Latvia. Furthermore there are no bilateral agreements on provision of pre-departure training. According to the legislation of Latvia and the National Identity Centre, a third-country national “is a third-country citizen – a person who is not a citizen of the Republic of Latvia, other European Union member state, European Economic Area state or Swiss Confederation.” (National Integration Centre 2013b).

### **Engagement of Non-State Actors**

According to previous research, data on non-governmental organizations are limited. Only a few organisations work with immigrant issues and provide necessary services to third-country nationals in Latvia. The most topical subjects they deal with are immigrant discrimination issues and raising tolerance. State-funded activities for immigrants, however, are based more on language learning and cultural activities. According to the researcher Akule, “the non-governmental organizations are also engaged in consultative political discussions which indirectly affect immigration issues, but overall the self-organization of the non-governmental organizations dealing with immigration is rather weak and their political and social participation is not noticeable” (Akule 2011).

One of the most active organizations is society Shelter Safe House. It was established in year 2007 with the main goal of expanding support services for persons in need. The main targets of their activities are human trafficking victims, legal immigrants, asylum seekers and refugees. They are creating new forms of training and also looking after interaction between local and governmental institutions and public and Christian organizations in Latvia and worldwide.

Society Shelter Safe House, in association with the Centre for Public Policy PROVIDUS and the Baltic Regional Fund, work on immigrant support, adaptation and integration projects. The main activities for third-country nationals are as follows.

- Offering Latvian language courses.
- Organising debates to create proposals on how to cope with immigration in Latvia. Twenty-five randomly chosen respondents along with field experts and policy makers seek proposals on how to increase immigration benefits in Latvia. The main proposals concern employment accessibility in certain spheres, increased social protection, ensuring the availability of language courses and allowing cost-free medical assistance for immigrants etc.
- Providing experts for legal and practical support consultations. Consultants work with immigrants' day-to-day issues such as communication between immigrants and educational institutions, health care institutions, legal issues, the recognition of education documents, business start-ups etc.
- Supporting third-country national groups such as women and children. Activities are targeted at these groups to improve their knowledge of Latvian with informal measures. Common activities for children and mothers involve thematic sessions and enjoyable forms of learning. Other activities include the organisation of self-help groups where third-country nationals, especially women, have a chance to meet and exchange experiences with persons in similar positions. These activities allow participation by both third-country nationals as well as local women, thereby improving communication and understanding between these two groups.
- Organizing informative events such as awareness days Ricu Racu (Rīču Raču) in Ozolnieki, Salaspils and Stopini. Activities include language courses and active informal communication between third-country national groups – namely children, parents, and women as well as locals. During awareness days, groups of third-country nationals take part in common activities with immigrants residing in other cities of Latvia. All members participating in the event take part in activities organized by Spriditis School (Sprīdīša skola) volunteers and Riga Latvian Society members. Participants during the information day receive tours around the area they are visiting, enjoy concerts and sport activities as well as consult experts regarding issues they encounter in everyday life.
- Supporting participation in voluntary activities. Support networks for third-country nationals are developed in association with the organization brīvprātīgais.lv ([www.brivpratigais.lv](http://www.brivpratigais.lv)).

The Centre of Human Rights launched an information campaign “This is my story...or ours?” in 2012. The aim of the campaign was to “increase awareness in Latvian society that migration has a positive impact on state development and raises social and cultural capital in Latvia” (Latvian Centre of Human Rights 2012).

Project “Hallo, Latvija - 2012!” is implemented by a civil-society organisation called the “Education and Innovation Development Centre”. The general aim of the project is to “promote the integration of the third-country nationals’ in Latvian society and to provide accessible and high-quality services”.

The NVO House in Riga is an establishment created under the Riga City Councils’ Education, Culture and Sports Department structure. Its “main aim is to support Riga’s Society Integration Programme for 2012-2017. It gives support to NGOs that are dealing with society integration issues and tries to

increase local-resident participation in local administrative-level decision-making” (Riga City Council).

The Latvian Association of Local and Regional Governments also takes active part in social integration projects. The winners’ cities which were nominated to participate in “the integration and inclusion of the municipality” competition are the Jelgava and Kandava municipalities. The competition was supported by the Authorities of the Union of Latvia in cooperation with the Latvian regions, the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Welfare, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Education and Science, the Ministry of the Environment and Regional Development and the European Commission’s representation in Latvia.

The Society Integration Foundation Project “TOGETHER. UNITED. ACTIVE” is supported by the European Fund for the Integration of Third-Country Nationals (Grant agreement no. IF/2011/1.a./16). The aim of the project is to create an e-platform for NGOs – [www.ngolatvia.lv](http://www.ngolatvia.lv) – and third-country nationals. It offers to find information about NGOs in Latvia and helps immigrants to engage in desired activities. It also gives useful information to third-country nationals upon arrival and while they are living in Latvia.

The Project “Intercultural Communication” (Grant agreement no. IF/2011/2./7), in the framework of the European Fund for the Integration of Third-Country Nationals, has as its main goal “offering people the opportunity to change their views, to put themselves in someone else’s place, and to walk in the shoes of another person” (SIF 2013a). The project offers several blocks of training courses supervised by a team of field experts. The training is meant to provide useful instruments for civil servants and municipal institutions in their everyday work with immigrants in Latvia.

## **Objectives of Integration Activities**

The main objectives of integration activities in Latvia are to raise society’s general awareness on immigration issues in Latvia. Responsible institutions and NGOs that deal with immigration issues with the support of available funding handle many information dissemination activities as well as work with active immigrants to help to integrate them with help of language, culture and interaction with locals. In addition, integration activities focus on the provision of intercultural competence to state, municipal and non-governmental representatives working with third-country nationals.

The objectives of the different actors in Latvia are currently in the line with state actors; the main activities regarding third-country nationals are European Union fund-based and are tightly connected with the state’s position on the issue.

Latvia has an agreement with a few third-national countries to transfer social guarantees: Russia, Ukraine, Belorussia, USA and Canada. “If a person is legally employed in Latvia, social guarantees can be transferred if there is a bilateral cooperation agreement with the country of origin. The agreement supports the transfer for services done in Latvia for the country of origin. Social insurance payments are taken into account in the country of origin” (National Integration Centre 2013a).

Unfortunately there is no information available on the recognition of educational qualifications. There is also a lack of institutional tools for data registration and so far in Latvia, low levels of requests for the recognition of qualifications.

## Policy implementation assessment

Since 2002, the Society Integration Foundation (SIF) has implemented different projects and grant schemes devoted to the integration of third-country nationals in Latvia. In addition to administrative functions, much work is done on dissemination activities. Providing information for both third-country nationals and locals to promote tolerance and a friendly environment for immigrants has been an important activity to educate society on integration issues. During these years, civil servants, NGO representatives etc., have improved their professional competencies on immigration and integration issues. According to the Society Integration Foundation, by “[a]cquiring and improving intercultural communication competencies, an effective communication and understanding among individuals representing different cultures is being reached, promoting respectful relationships based on common understanding” (SIF 2013b).

The implementation of the tasks set out in the Guidelines of the integration policy was launched with the establishment of the National Integration centre in 2012. It is too early to assess its impacts; however it is clear that more information is reaching the public space and society regarding immigrant issues. The importance of welcoming and integrating other nations in Latvia is also periodically mirrored in political debate.

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### **Website**

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