

COMPARATIVE WORKING PAPER

Attitudes, intergroup relations, and post-2014 migrant integration experiences in small- and medium-sized towns and rural areas: A cross-country perspective

WORK PACKAGE 5

June 2023



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WORKING PAPER

<https://whole-comm.eu>





Document information

Project acronym:	Whole-COMM
Project full title:	Exploring the Integration of Post-2014 Migrants in Small and Medium-sized Towns and Rural Areas from a Whole-of-Community Perspective
Grant agreement ID:	101004714
Call topic:	H2020-SC6-MIGRATION-2020
Project Start Date:	1 January 2021
Duration:	39 months
Deliverable number:	D5.2
Deliverable title:	Comparative Working Paper on policy outcomes
Due date of deliverable:	Month 24 (delayed to Month 30)
Authors:	Leila Hadj Abdou, Caitlin Katsiaficas (EUI)
Reviewers:	Kristen Biehl (Sabanci University), Andrea Membretti (Whole-COMM Advisory Board)
Work Package:	WP5 – Policy outcomes. Reciprocal attitudes, social relations and migrants’ integration experiences
Work Package leader:	EUI
Dissemination level:	Public
Type:	Report
Version:	1.0



Executive summary

Small- and medium-sized towns and rural areas (SMsTRAs) are increasingly involved in migrant integration, but there is less understanding of integration dynamics in these contexts as compared to larger destinations. This working paper highlights key factors that are shaping attitudes and social relations between post-2014 migrants and long-term residents, and consequently migrant integration experiences, in SMsTRAs. It is based on data collected by the Whole-COMM research project through participant observation, interviews, and focus groups in 42 migrant-receiving localities across 9 countries.

A significant trend that emerged across all countries studied was a lack of intergroup interactions and meaningful relations. Still, work, school, and civil society-run activities provided spaces where migrants could improve their language skills, expand their social networks, and make connections to better work and housing opportunities, all of which improved their integration experiences.

Places for encounter, especially those providing some type of structure or moderation, were critical for fostering interactions between post-2014 migrants and long-term residents. Civil society actors (including migrant-led organizations) were important sources of support, serving as a bridge to local communities and at times filled critical gaps in integration services, while engaged local authorities also supported positive integration experiences. Yet, across the board, building meaningful intergroup relationships was often difficult – especially beyond volunteers – even where there was a positive attitude towards migrants.



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Acknowledgement

We would like to thank Kristen Sarah Biehl (Sabanci University), and Andrea Membretti (Whole-COMM Advisory Board) for their very useful feedback and comments to an earlier version of this working paper.



1. Introduction

In the wake of the so-called ‘refugee crisis’, small- and medium-sized towns and rural areas (SMsTRAs) have been playing an increasing role in accommodating humanitarian migrants. The lack of immediately available reception facilities in cities, coupled with dispersal policies implemented by states to ensure an ‘equal’ distribution of asylum seekers across their national territories, has led to the increased involvement of SMsTRAs in the reception of people seeking refuge (Flamant et al. 2020). While humanitarian reasons have been a significant driver of migration to smaller localities, some post-2014 migrants have also moved to these places for different reasons. Although immigrant integration in cities has been a focus of research for decades, relatively little is known about smaller-sized destinations, localities which before 2014-15 often had less or no prior experience with migration compared to their larger counterparts.

This working paper analyses factors that shape attitudes and social relations between long-term residents and post-2014 migrants in SMsTRAs, and how these influence post-2014 migrants’ integration experiences, based on research conducted in nine countries (Austria, Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Sweden, and Turkey). It is the outcome of research conducted within work package five of the Whole-COMM research project. Based on data collected through participant observation in public spaces, interviews with migrants who have arrived since 2014, and focus group discussions with long-term residents and migrants in 42 migrant-receiving localities, this working paper highlights key factors that are shaping attitudes and social relations, and consequently migrant integration experiences, in SMsTRAs. The nine country reports can be found on the Whole-COMM webpage.¹

For the purposes of this working paper, we conceive of ‘attitudes’ as perceptions of migrants in general or of certain groups in particular (e.g., particular nationalities or religions). When it comes to ‘intergroup relations’, we look at the frequency, intensity, and nature (e.g., positive, negative, or neutral; meaningful or transactional) of interactions between post-2014 migrants and long-term residents; the latter group may or may not have a migration background. In line with social contact theory (Allport 1954), previous research on attitudes towards migrants in rural areas indicates that negative attitudes might be attributed to more limited contact with and presence of migrants in the local community (Glorius et al., 2020). Both attitudes and intergroup relations are central to migrants’ integration experiences, which we understand as the ways in which post-2014 migrants feel included or excluded in their local communities. The focus thus is on integration experiences as reported by post-2014 migrants and long-term residents – their personal accounts and perceptions – rather than ‘hard’ integration outcomes.

¹ Whole-COMM, ‘[Country reports on social relations, individual attitudes and migrant integration experiences](https://whole-comm.eu/category/country-report/)’, <https://whole-comm.eu/category/country-report/>



The working paper is structured as follows: First, we describe methods used, including the rationale for the selection of countries and localities as well as data collection. In the next section, the working paper then discusses a major trend that emerged across all countries studied, namely a lack of interactions between post-2014 migrants and long-term residents. Following this, the paper summarizes key factors shaping integration experiences in the localities researched. The working paper then describes a local-level intervention by the Whole-COMM project, walking tours, which aimed to increase the propensity of contact between post-2014 migrants and long-term residents.



2. Methods

2.1. Selection of countries and localities

The research and analysis presented in this paper was conducted in eight European Union member states (Austria, Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden, Spain, and Poland) and one EU candidate country (Turkey). Whilst all of these countries received significant numbers of asylum seekers during the so-called ‘refugee crisis’, the selected countries represent different types of migration histories (both new and old immigration countries), and consequently different systems, institutional capacities, and experiences with regard to receiving migrants.

In total, Whole-COMM researchers gathered data in 42 localities across these nine countries. In each country, between three and six different SMsTRAs were selected for study. The localities (cases) in each country were selected based on a set of variables, following the project’s case selection approach, which represent a ‘diverse case selection strategy’ aiming to identify a variety of causes of an outcome (see Pettrachin and Caponio 2022, p. 42). While all selected localities exhibited a significant arrival of post-2014 migrants, they were selected according to a list of variables. These variables included population size, the presence of a reception facility between 2014-17, the number of residing migrants, and share of residents with a foreign nationality. The localities selected reflected regional variations within the countries, including with regard to unemployment levels, number of inhabitants, and local politics (i.e., conservative or progressive parties in power, local political traditions).² Based on these variables, four types of localities were selected to be included in the research project, as shown in Table 1, below:

Table 1: Typology of Whole-COMM localities

Type A	Characterized by a recovering local economy, an improving demographic profile, and migrant settlement before 2014
Type B	Characterized by an improving economic and demographic situation and no remarkable arrivals of migrants before 2014
Type C	Characterized by demographic and economic decline and migrant settlement before 2014
Type D	Characterized by economic and demographic decline and no remarkable arrivals of migrants before 2014

² For an in-depth discussion of case selection in the project see Pettrachin and Caponio 2022.



2.2. Data collection

In all localities, three types of methods were used to collect data: participant observation, interviews, and focus groups. The data collection phase occurred in all sites between May and August 2022.

Primary data were first collected through participant observation (walking ethnography and site observations) in the selected localities. Based on a mapping exercise, it included the identification of each locality's infrastructure as well as the areas, if any, with a concentration of post-2014 migrants, as well as associations, migrant support groups, and sites of anti-migrant mobilizations. In each locality, a minimum of two sites were selected by each country team, where they then conducted the participant observation. Participant observation aimed to observe whether and how post-2014 and long-term migrants interact, and as well as the barriers or facilitating factors for this interaction (or lack thereof). Types of sites included shopping malls, train stations, public parks, main streets and squares, entertainment venues, sport centres, swimming pools, lakes, and coffee houses (i.e., high-traffic areas with the potential for intergroup interaction). Researchers took field notes to capture their observations, summarizing, among other issues, which type of encounters happened in public space, what the purpose of these interactions were, which languages were used, and if any organized activities that involved post-2014 migrants and long-term residents took place. Based on their observations, the researchers identified what barriers and opportunities for encounters the observed spaces offered, including a range of considerations from urban planning and public infrastructure to economic factors such as the commodification of public space.

Following the participant observation phase, in-depth interviews with post-2014 migrants were conducted in each locality. Before conducting these interviews, all researchers participated in a training on trauma-sensitive interviewing (see Box 1). Using the same semi-structured interview guide across all localities, the interviews with post-2014 migrants were aimed at understanding migrants' experiences of inclusion and exclusion in SMsTRAs and further analyzing the intergroup interactions already observed through participant observation. Interviewers were instructed in the interview guide to explore spatial, social, political, and policy factors as potential drivers of integration experiences, relations, and attitudes. In total, 329 individual interviews with post-2014 migrants were conducted in the nine countries. The composition of interviewees aimed at equal inclusion of men and women and representation of the major countries of origin of post-2014 migrants in each locality, in addition to, ideally, a mix of different age backgrounds (although minors were not included in



the study).³ Depending on the project resources in each country team, either full transcripts or summaries of the interviews conducted were prepared by the country research teams.

Box 1: How to conduct interviews with post-2014 migrants: Ethical and practical considerations

Migrants who have arrived since 2014 in Whole-COMM research countries are a heterogeneous group. However, most are migrants who left from areas facing political and humanitarian crises. Post-2014 asylum-seeking migrants may have thus experienced traumatic events and significant hardships that led to their migration in the first place, in addition to those that may have been experienced during their migration journey and after arrival. Traumatic experiences during the different stages of migration have been identified by medical research on forced migration as the ‘triple trauma paradigm’ (TTP) (Theisen-Womersley 2021). In countries of arrival, such as the Whole-COMM research countries, trauma and its effects (such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depression) are often exacerbated by stressors. These can include long waiting periods during the asylum process as well as uncertainty about asylum decisions and a lack of agency, in addition to a range of potential stressors that relate to settling in (Katsiaficas 2022). In this context, asking post-2014 migrants about their social relations and integration experiences can potentially touch upon experienced traumas and their effects.

In light of the potential vulnerability of interviewees, before conducting fieldwork, all Whole-COMM researchers attended a training on trauma-sensitive interviewing. The training provided tools to understand the dynamics of trauma and PTSD in the context of migration and provided guidelines for trauma-sensitive interviewing. It included how to hold focus groups that emphasized safety, structure, and predictability. The training was complemented with selected readings on research ethics and trauma in refugee populations.

Some key messages researchers were provided with were as follows:

- Prepare the interview well, taking into account the backgrounds of your interviewees

³ Russia’s invasion of Ukraine took place during the research phase of the project. While the research team spoke with post-2014 migrants about the impact of the arrival of refugees from Ukraine, this refugee group was not a specific target of the research. See Table 2.



- Be aware of your own emotional state while conducting interviews
- Provide a calm, welcoming, and safe interview environment by, among other things, explaining the framework and trying to define a common purpose
- Structure the interview in a – for the interviewee – clear and transparent manner
- Set limits for questions to not trigger the interviewee (do not search for traumatic stories)
- Be predictable
- Adapt your language so it is clear and understandable for the respective interviewee, and speak slowly
- Take time
- Do not interrupt and respect silences
- Recognize signs of discomfort, including non-verbal cues
- Intervene with grounding techniques in case trauma starts to come up
- Close the interview by explaining what happens next, and reduce/ease emotions if necessary
- Practice self-care to prevent vicarious traumatisation (i.e., the effect of being exposed to someone else's trauma)

Finally, focus group discussions, consisting of post-2014 migrants and long-term residents (including residents with a migration background) aimed at further exploring relevant factors in each locality that are shaping positive and negative intergroup relations, attitudes, and integration experiences. Concerning the focus groups, a training was provided by the European University Institute (EUI) for all Whole-COMM researchers on how to organize and implement these focus groups (see Box 2). The focus group training provided techniques for facilitating discussion in order to identify factors shaping social relations and integration experiences, and created awareness about potential challenges when implementing focus groups. In total, 44 focus groups were conducted in the nine countries, using the same template and questions across all localities, with the aim of exploring spatial, social, political, and policy factors.



Box 2: Example of a mapping exercise during focus groups

Start with a statement, e.g., “Migrants and locals have good relations with each other in our town.” Divide participants into two groups:

Task 1: Why do migrants and locals have good relations in this community? Participants come up with responses.

Each group provides feedback to the other group, with the opportunity to agree/disagree/complement their responses.

Task 2: Take the statements from task 1 and try to ask another why question. For instance, if a response in task 1 was “because children of migrants go to the local school,” take this answer in the discussion to the next level: Why do migrant children go to the local school? “Because there is a policy at the municipal/regional/national level that gives all children access to education regardless of civil status.”

For both the focus groups and individual interviews, participants were selected following a purposive or convenience sampling approach. Below (see Table 2) is a list of the different countries of origin of those persons interviewed in each country. All interviews and focus group discussions followed strict rules of consent given by the participants, and the data obtained was fully anonymized and stored according to data protection rules established by the Whole-COMM project consortium in line with legal requirements, which were scrutinized by each research institution of the country teams.

Table 2: Countries of origin of interviewees and focus group participants

Austria	Afghanistan, Austria, Ethiopia, Ghana, Iran, Iraq, Russia (Chechnya), Syria
Belgium	Afghanistan, Algeria, Belarus, Belgium, Burundi, Eritrea, Iran, Iraq, Morocco, the Netherlands, Peru, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Turkey, Ukraine
Germany	Afghanistan, Brazil, Eritrea, Germany, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Japan, Lebanon, Russia, Syria, Tajikistan, Turkey, Venezuela
Italy	Afghanistan, Albania, Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Egypt, Eritrea, Gambia, Guinea, Italy, Ivory Coast, Mali, Morocco, Nigeria, Pakistan, Senegal, Syria, Togo, Tunisia



The Netherlands	Afghanistan, Albania, Egypt, Eritrea, Guinea, Iran, Libya, the Netherlands, Philippines, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey, Yemen
Poland	China, Pakistan, Poland, Ukraine
Spain	Algeria, Argentina, Armenia, Brazil, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Gambia, Georgia, Honduras, Mali, Mexico, Morocco, Paraguay, Peru, Senegal, South Africa, Spain, Syria, Tunisia, Ukraine, Venezuela
Sweden	Afghanistan, Eritrea, Finland, Iraq, Jordan, Palestine, Russia (Chechnya), Somalia, Sweden, Syria, Turkey, Yemen
Turkey	Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Turkey

Data from the individual interviews and focus groups were then analyzed by the country team researchers through a qualitative content analysis. Later, in four of the countries studied (Austria, Germany, Italy, and Sweden), an intervention (walking tour) took place in one locality per country, with the aim of increasing the propensity of post-2014 migrants and long-term residents to interact with each other. In each of the four selected places, this walking tour focused on the topic of change in the respective locality.



3. Key trends in inclusion and exclusion

Overall, the Whole-COMM team found that the context in which integration in SMsTRAs takes place can be seen as a continuum, with outright hostility and experiences of rejection at one end, inclusion on the other, and indifference by a 'silent majority' in between. While we found a variety of integration experiences of post-2014 migrants and contributing factors in SMsTRAs both within and across countries, the Whole-COMM research identified a stark pattern across all countries that represents a particular challenge: a significant lack of meaningful intergroup relations between post-2014 migrants and long-term residents, which becomes exacerbated by experiences of marginalization and discrimination. This is not to omit the fact that the project also identified that, for a significant number of migrants, SMsTRAs provide a positive living experience, provided that employment and housing can be found. Overall, there is mixed evidence for the potential of SMsTRAs in accommodating post-2014 migrants. Overall, however, the lack of social relations across the countries and localities studied stands out, even if some of the research participants did succeed in establishing positive and meaningful intergroup social relations.

This section focusses on the trend of low meaningful intergroup relations and highlights instances of marginalization and discrimination identified during the research, which exacerbate the lack of intergroup contact, and how attitudes towards migrants can change over time.

3.1. Lack of meaningful intergroup interactions and relationships

Migrating to another place represents a change in an individual's social network, and to a certain extent a rupture, creating the need to establish new contacts in the place of arrival. Previous research has consequently highlighted that migration to another country generally entails lower levels of sociability, at least initially after arrival, and that migrants tend to report higher levels of loneliness compared to those without a migrant background (Barjaková and Garnero 2022). This finding was confirmed by Whole-COMM research. Many post-2014 migrants interviewed had few meaningful relations and regular interactions with locals. Everyday encounters between these groups often remained limited to necessary exchanges and did not extend to more meaningful contacts that would enable long-lasting relations. Encounters in public space, therefore, did not generally lead to contact beyond co-presence or transactional activities. Moreover, the majority of local residents tended to be seen by post-2014 migrants as indifferent to the presence of newcomers.

This lack of meaningful interactions between post-2014 migrants and long-term residents could be observed in the majority of localities studied, often independently of whether or not this locality had previous experience with migration and related diversity. The scarcity of meaningful relations is partly more emphasized in localities with economic and demographic decline (type C and D localities), although there was no uniform pattern across all countries according to type of locality. The degree of social interactions, however, differed according to



different areas of life, and as will be described more in depth in section 4 of this paper, intergroup contacts tended to be more pronounced in the area of work (for adults) and school (for minors).

Interactions between post-2014 migrants and native-born long-term residents in many localities are scarce and difficult to establish.

In the interviews, the lack of meaningful relations with locals were emphasized by expressions of profound feelings of loneliness and through description of the environments in their new communities as unfriendly. The scarcity of social contacts is negatively associated by post-2014 migrant interviewees themselves with a variety of other integration outcomes, such as language acquisition, the ability to access information, and labour market opportunities.

“I often feel lonely and left to myself here. Not only in figuring out administration but also in my neighbourhood. Especially in the one where I used to live before moving. There, I didn’t know anybody. I don’t even know if there are other people from Chad in this city. I am very lonely, and I am a person who likes to be around people. It weighs a lot on me to be alone. And the fact that nobody would visit me at my home is so difficult. But where I live now, I have some Belgian neighbours who have come to share a meal with me. They have invited me to their place. That really has meant a lot to me! I had only moved in a week before and, since, they keep track of me daily. When they don’t see me for a day, they call me. That touches me a lot. These are the very positive encounters, but there are also some people there who do not accept others at all. They don’t accept you because you are a foreigner” (Interview, Belgium).

“The people aren’t friendly here. In my country, your neighbour will talk to you. Here, the neighbour’s door is closed. We’ve had the same neighbour for five years and he’s never said hi to me or my family” (Interview, Belgium).

“I cannot say either they are good or bad: No one has done harm to me and no one is my friend after 6 years. For sure, locals are not open. When we go out, they never talk to us” (Interview, Italy).

“The Germans are afraid. They don’t like contact with us” (Interview, Germany).



While many post-2014 migrants interviewed noted the lack of intergroup relations in terms of integration outcomes, at the same time, connecting with other migrants with the same cultural background or language was described by post-2014 migrants as something that can provide a feeling of comfort.

“If I only talk to Nederlanders, I learn the language, I gain new insights, but for my spirit and social feeling, to feel comfortable, it is nice to chat with people like you” (Interview, the Netherlands).

The feeling of social isolation and a lack of meaningful interactions were exacerbated in cases where post-2014 migrants felt overt forms of discrimination and marginalization. Whilst in most localities the feeling of locals being indifferent to post-2014 migrants and more subtle forms of rejection prevailed, experiences of overt hostility also stood out in some. In all countries, albeit to differing degrees, post-2014 migrants described incidents of discrimination in public spaces, on public transport, between neighbours, at the workplace, and in educational institutions – even in state-funded integration courses. Interestingly, the expression of prejudices against migrants occurred in localities independent of whether or not these places had prior experiences with migration and related diversity.

Marginalization and discrimination exacerbate feelings of social isolation among post-2014 migrants

Experiences of discrimination were often tied to visible difference, i.e., they represented racialized forms of discrimination, as the following quotes underline:

“I do not have Austrian friends, all my friends are Arabs (Syrians and Iraqis), because the locals do not interact with us. Some Austrian guys once said that every person with black hair is a thief” (Interview, Austria).

“For example, if I am to ride the bus and I sit next to an old lady or an old man or a young guy who have a bag they would hug their bag and make me feel as if we are here to steal from them. And if there is an empty seat next to me, they would rather stay standing than sit next to me” (Interview, Austria).

“Some people do not like that I am dark (donker). They do not like it. But yeah, I cannot do anything about this. [...] Sometimes you hear them say that they do not like that there are foreigners here. Some people walk along the street and when they see you, they change the side of the street. But yeah, this can happen. There are racist people in every country” (Interview, the Netherlands).



In several instances in the EU countries analysed, experiences of racism were explicitly associated by post-2014 interviewees with attitudes against Muslims. Post-2014 migrants repeatedly gave testimonies as to how wearing a veil affected integration experiences. Overall, these experiences affected the extent to which people felt accepted in public spaces.

“Origin and religion certainly play a major role. My wife feels it even more because she wears a headscarf. It was very unpleasant in [...]. She was looked at very unpleasantly and was not spoken to once in a year. She had no way to get in touch with anyone” (Interview, Austria).

“I have a friend who found a job as soon as she decided to not wear it [the Muslim headscarf] anymore, but as long as she had been wearing it: no chance. So, you must stop wearing it if you want to work here. But I don’t want to. I want them to respect my religion, just as I respect theirs!” (Interview, Spain).

The perception that Islam is a concern was also occasionally expressed directly by native-born respondents during the Whole-COMM fieldwork.

“It would be even better to help these people on their own continent, this is cheaper and does not uproot anyone. [...] Immigration of different, partly hostile peoples also brings many problems and criminality to our country. The locality is becoming an ISIS hotspot in Austria There have already been repeated problems with ISIS sympathizers and Islamists in the locality in the past” (Interview, Austria).

Discrimination was felt by post-2014 migrants to be impacting their integration outcomes, especially in relation to housing and work. Indeed, discrimination in the private housing market was an especially prevalent issue raised by post-2014 migrants. Across all countries, most migrants interviewed had experienced racism or discrimination when trying to find a flat to rent. This issue was especially acute in localities with an increasing scarcity and decreasing affordability of housing.

“There are many problems finding a house. I’ve been looking for an apartment for one year but you find nothing because landlords do not rent out to foreigners, even though you have a work contract” (Interview, Italy).

“When we were looking for our flat on the internet, we saw a flat that we liked. A girl from the Red Cross who speaks Catalan helped us with everything, explaining our situation [to the agency] and when she mentioned it was for a migrant family, the real estate agency said that they were going to ask the landlord, and will call her back. And when they did, they said it has already been rented. But two or three weeks later, the same advertisement was online again. So, I believe they didn’t want to rent it to us because we are migrants” (Interview, Spain).



Feelings of competition over (partly scarce) resources and opportunities was an issue strongly linked to experiences of discrimination reported by post-2014 migrants. Among long-term residents, the feeling of threat and competition from post-2014 migrants tended to be compounded by a sense of injustice, building on perceptions about the benefits enjoyed in particular by refugees and asylum seekers. In other words, it was seen as a form of ‘positive discrimination’.

Issues related to resource competition were particularly pronounced in the Turkish case, which in terms of the intensity of this perceived threat by locals represented a bit of an outlier compared with the other countries studied. In EU countries, perceptions of threat were identified less frequently or emerged in more subtle forms. In the Turkish case, however, interviewed post-2014 migrants reported being increasingly confronted with aggravated forms of discrimination in their daily lives related to the country’s economic decline, increased poverty, and inflation. The majority of migrants participating in the research in Turkey stated, as a consequence, that they were willing to leave the country if they had the chance. In EU countries studied, the arrival of Ukrainian refugees exacerbated feelings of discrimination by other post-2014 migrants (see Box 3).

Box 3: Different treatment of Ukrainian refugees: Exacerbating feelings of discrimination by post-2014 migrants

Perceptions of discrimination by post-2014 migrants were exacerbated by the arrival of considerable numbers of Ukrainian refugees from 2022 onwards in all EU countries analyzed. Interviewed post-2014 migrants from non-European countries such as Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq expressed a strong awareness that refugees from Ukraine are treated differently than they are. This perception has led to frustration and disappointment among many, which in turn could hinder their willingness to integrate in the medium and long term. In many interviews, the differing treatment was criticized as racist by post-2014 migrants, who called out national and local policies for favouring ‘white’, ‘Christian’, and ‘European’ refugees. The two quotations below from the Austrian and Dutch fieldwork are representative of the perceptions of many post-2014 migrants interviewed in other EU localities.

“Ukrainians are ‘noble refugees’. They get everything immediately. [...] It also has to do with religion, I think. Ukrainians are Christians and we are Muslims” (Interview, Austria).

“I do see differences. People from Ukraine get everything. [...] I understand that it is their right, I want it for them too, I know what war means, what it means to have to



leave your country. [...] I am not angry, but I am sad for myself. But I am happy for the Ukrainians. There are also many Arab countries who did not welcome us. But the Netherlands said 'welcome', this is important for us. But we also deserve good things and a good environment, and that people treat us well. I am not angry with them; they are also refugees like me. [...] The difference is very clear. Some people say, 'yes because they are from Europe, and you are not.' [...]" (Interview, the Netherlands).

Post-2014 migrants interviewed across the EU tended to emphasize their empathy with refugees from Ukraine, as is also expressed in the quote above, and in many countries they helped as volunteers to welcome Ukrainian refugees. Still, they said that they find it hard to cope with the differential treatment. This was especially noted with reference to post-2014 asylum seekers who had been waiting for long periods to be eligible for a language class or get permission to access the labour market. In addition, post-2014 migrants trying to find a flat reported that Ukrainians have been more successful in the housing market, limiting their own chances for affordable housing in an already challenging housing market.

Hence, the arrival of Ukrainians exacerbated a feeling of discrimination and created a sense of competition for scarce resources such as accommodation. Overall, post-2014 migrants interviewed felt like 'second-class migrants' and as less considered and supported than Ukrainians by both government institutions and local communities. The differential treatment thus significantly impacted the extent to which (non-Ukrainian) post-2014 migrants felt welcome and accepted in Europe, shaping their experiences in their local communities in a negative way, even as some became engaged in their communities to welcome these newcomers.

Post-2014 migrants reported using a variety of strategies to cope with discrimination, ranging from attempts to ignore it to openly mobilizing and reacting to it.

"I have been treated badly many times, but let's say I got used to it. People were frightened, because they saw a danger in me, and for this they pushed me away. They think I steal their jobs but we do menial jobs, which Italians no longer do. Once while I was going to work by bus, two Italian kids started to bother me and pushed me to the ground. I didn't react. I went away" (Interview, Italy).

"I meet a lot of people that are very cruel to me, but I always give them a straight answer. I always tell them, no, I'm not just receiving money from the



government. I work here. I pay taxes. I take my salary and I spend it here, I don't send it anywhere" (Interview, Sweden).

Occasionally, forms of subordination were also encountered during fieldwork, as is illustrated in the following interview from Spain:

"The thing is that we must adapt ourselves to the way that they want us... this way we will have positive relationships and will be well-received... when we do what they want us to do. There are still some people here that make us sweep the floor on our knees, while others – probably most – let us use the mop. But if they tell us to do it on our knees we have to comply and do it how they tell us... and so I am not the person who complains quickly, I rather do what I am told, so that I don't get into trouble. And I always ask them how I should do things because here they are done differently, very often, and I don't want to do it the wrong way" (Interview, Spain).

At the same time, some post-2014 migrants, including those that represented minority groups in their own countries, interviewed put these experiences in relation to their experiences of discrimination in their countries of origin, underlining that these experiences were less of an issue in their new countries than in the ones they left.

"I am very happy here. Here, we don't say 'Are you Hazara? Are you Pashto?' If you do something, you will get it. If you don't do it, you don't get it. That is why I am happy here, I can learn and achieve things" (Interview, Germany).

3.2. The passage of time as a factor influencing integration experiences

Prior to a discussion of factors that shape integration experiences, it is important to note that these experiences, as well as attitudes and the state of intergroup relations, are not static but rather exhibit a temporal dimension. Time can have both a positive or negative effect on integration experiences and the related issues of attitudes and intergroup relations. On the one hand, in most cases, the longer that post-2014 migrants had lived in the community, the more social interactions and overall experiences improved. Many explained that living in the new country/locality had become easier over time.

On the other hand, in some areas, as time passed, what were previously welcoming attitudes and proactive support by locals subsequently decreased. The decrease in support is also reflected increasingly restrictive border policies (Czaika, Bohnet and Zardo 2021, 15), and rising contestation of migration (Dennison and Geddes 2019). In some localities, a feeling of disillusionment about migrant integration on both sides emerged, as is expressed in the following quote by a Syrian interviewee:

"In 2015, there was a lot of support. But then, the situation changed. We realized that the Germans were disappointed that people did not learn the



language faster and that integration had not happened. But they did not understand that migrants had no possibility to learn the languages as there were no places in the classes. Germans saw the migrants on the street, speaking Arabic, and they were disappointed. The others were also disappointed because they were kept at home and there was no way to build up your life” (Interview, Germany).

Interviewees in many EU localities mentioned that migrants are not welcomed as they were in 2014-15. Outside of the EU, this temporal dimension had an especially negative effect in Turkey, where Whole-COMM research highlighted a significant increase in social tensions and hostility against post-2014 migrants over time. Whilst initially having a job contributed to a positive integration experience, post-2014 migrants are now rather viewed as competitors in the labour market. Post-2014 migrants are scapegoated by locals for the unemployment of natives, economic deprivation, and scarcity of resources when it comes to services.

“When we first came, we did not get such a bad reaction. Now, however, when I go to the hospital, everyone, from the nurse to the doctor, says we should go back to our hometown. They are angry at us right now. ‘Why don’t you go to your hometown? You live here while our soldiers are there. You are comfortable here. You live here the way you want while we try to protect you,’ they say” (Interview, Turkey).

“It was very good when we first arrived. At least we were able to come home and go out very easily. Right now, we are worried that we will get a bad reaction from someone. That’s why I do not go out much. Right now, I do not feel comfortable because we experience discrimination and racism when something happens and someone speaks Arabic. (...) You know I would like to eliminate the discrimination. There are good and bad Syrians as well as good and bad Turks. I wish they did not assume everyone was bad” (Interview, Turkey).



4. Factors shaping attitudes, intergroup relations, and migrant integration experiences

This section discusses important elements that emerged during the research as factors influencing attitudes, relations, and integration experiences. Because of the diversity within and across countries studied, we refrain from strictly categorizing these three dynamics in terms of different types of SMsTRAs or countries. Instead, in this section, we focus on identifying key factors that have a positive or negative impact on attitudes, relations, and experiences across and within these localities.

Across the countries studied, a range of factors were observed to influence the context in which post-2014 migrants and long-term residents do (or do not) interact and build relationships, with implications for migrants' integration experiences. These include factors at the structural, group, and individual levels. Yet, the explanation of the ways in which these factors influence attitudes, social relations, and integration experiences is far from simple or universal. Instead, important differences can exist within and across localities and countries.

Additionally, in comparing findings across Whole-COMM countries, it becomes clear that, in many cases, these factors can have either a positive or negative effect on attitudes, relations, and experiences. One such example is residential segregation, where high concentrations of migrants in certain parts of a locality often leads to less intergroup contact but can spur dense support networks. At the same time, less segregation does not automatically lead to more, let alone meaningful, interaction. Similarly, a predominance of migrant children in a particular school may hinder intergroup interactions but protect them from bullying. The presence of existing migrant communities can work for or against positive attitudes and interactions and meaningful intergroup relations. Likewise, having children makes it more difficult for women to enter the labour market, but offers an opportunity to interact with other parents.

At the outset, it is worth mentioning two contextual elements (of the many) that go beyond the scope of integration actors but shape the contexts in which integration takes place. The first relates to who arrives in a particular locality and why – and, more particularly, whether newcomers chose a certain locality, were placed there and wanted to stay, or were placed there and were looking to move on (by definition, those who already left were not interviewed by Whole-COMM researchers). All of the countries studied have received considerable numbers of asylum seekers or refugees since 2014, and many have some type of dispersal mechanism in place to distribute these newcomers across the country. Asylum seekers are typically assigned to a particular reception facility, largely based on space available (European Migration Network 2014) rather than networks or preferences. Those who did not arrive in a particular locality by choice may not have had an interest in settling in a SMsTRA, and a smaller-size destination may not be the ideal fit whether in general (e.g., the migrant in question may like or dislike the 'village character' of a small place) or for a particular



individual's profile (e.g., her/his professional background may not align with available jobs). Nevertheless, with asylum procedures often lasting a considerable length of time and with, in some instances, other mobility restrictions in place, migrants may decide to stay in the area upon receiving a protection status, even if this was not their initial preference. This was especially true for families whose children had since enrolled in local schools. Thus, national immigration policies play an important role in setting the stage for what comes next.

Relatedly, the reception phase influences integration via the quality of services available. In Italy, for example, asylum seekers are placed in Emergency Reception Centres (Centri di accoglienza straordinaria, CAS), where quality highly varies, while recognized refugees are placed in System of Accommodation and Integration (SAI). The quality of reception services offered has influenced language and other skills – in other words, it has had important implications for integration trajectories. Research has shown that “the experiences that new arrivals face in the first phase of their reception and accommodation, and the relationships they build in their neighbourhoods and host cities have a long-term effect on their lives later and play a significant role in the way their impressions, aspirations and motivations develop along the way of their integration trajectories” (Seethaler-Wari 2018, p. 152). Another way in which national migration policy influences integration comes with regard to family reunification: Feelings of anger and loneliness were exacerbated by family reunification regulations and waiting times that often delayed reunion with family members still abroad.

Secondly, the size and location of the locality is often connected to the robustness of its public infrastructure, whether this relates to integration-specific services like language courses or mainstream services like education, health, and public transportation (as well as travel time needed to access services). It also has implications for the range of employment and educational opportunities available for residents and the number of public spaces where people can interact. This includes infrastructure and opportunities most relevant for particular age groups, such as children, young adults, and the elderly. Furthermore, it may be connected to the diversity of the community and past migration. Whole-COMM researchers in the Netherlands posited that medium-sized locales may be the ‘sweet spot’ – offering a feeling of calm and safety but also job opportunities and more robust support. In contrast, in Italy, the size and demographics of the studied municipalities were not found to be very significant in explaining inclusion.

“I got housing in a small village, ... they have approximately 10 houses there, I had to stay there. There is no supermarket, there is nothing there, almost for one year I stayed like that. I went almost crazy there, why would I lose a year like that, doing nothing? It was a very negative experience. Why put the new people in a small village where they cannot do anything?” (Interview, the Netherlands).

Migrants do not necessarily view SMsTRAs as bad places to live: Some reported preferring smaller places due to their dense support network, sense of calm and safety, slower pace of life, and perception of these places as good for raising a family. While the integration of



migrants in SMsTRAs can provide an opportunity for local development (Perlik and Membretti 2018), these smaller locales may come with particular integration-related challenges when compared to large cities, including fewer employment opportunities and more limited support structures.

Despite the complexities in precisely identifying factors that help and hinder local integration, the following were found to influence attitudes, social relations, and integration experiences in Whole-COMM research sites:

- Civil society action
- Engagement by local authorities
- Narratives in media and politics
- The politicization of migration
- Social networks
- Places for encounter
- Individual factors

4.1. Civil society action

Bottom-up solidarity, a welcoming environment, and positive initial experiences with locals were all important for generating positive integration experiences in Whole-COMM countries. Civil society actors played a critical role in supporting newcomers in settling in SMsTRAs. These included migrant-led organizations, other non-governmental organizations, and volunteers. They provided a range of support, including practical assistance that proved especially pivotal in the housing and employment search, and often served as a bridge to the local community. Their critical role was seen in all countries; however, the civil society sector was more robust in some communities than in others, partly related to the national political context and the size of the locale. For instance, in Sweden, where the national government and public sector play a strong role in integration, civil society is less active. Smaller communities may also have fewer civil society actors. Local authorities are more or less involved in integration due to their varying policy frameworks, political contexts, and other factors, and in some instances civil society fills crucial gaps. Volunteers often played an especially important role where there was a lack of government services. Overall, a local support infrastructure that is permanent and accessible tended to support interactions and positive integration experiences.

“There is really a lot of solidarity in this city! Many people, often older people, volunteered to help us when we were in the asylum centre and afterwards as well. They always ask us what we need, what our children might need. They ask if they can help with their homework for example. People are always open to help us here! We have a good position in this town because of the local community. They have helped a lot. It is thanks to them that we live well” (Focus group, Belgium).



In addition, civil society activities provided spaces for encounter that helped migrants to build their social network and a sense of inclusion and community cohesion. Such activities included festivals, cultural events, language cafes, and volunteering initiatives. Yet, while helpful for building social networks, for many recent migrants their only local contacts were volunteers, meaning that their networks remained limited. Moreover, in many EU localities studied, researchers noted that many volunteers are retired women and that a sizable age gap may lend itself more readily to the provision of support than friendship, illustrating again that the element of volunteerism is important yet may remain limited in impact. In addition, whilst civil society participation was in many localities seen as a significant way to support integration, it may be an opportunity taken up by just some – for instance, those who are outgoing, have a shared interest, and can find the time – showing that not all migrants may wish to participate (indeed, the same could be said with regard to long-term residents).

4.2. Engagement by local authorities

The level and type of engagement by local governments, namely, supportive and active local government institutions, were important for bringing about positive integration experiences and feelings of inclusion. Conversely, a dearth of political leadership and limited political attention by local government actors was a hindering factor.

“It is difficult until today. There is no welcome culture. [...] I learned that, in other places, newcomers receive a small welcome thing. This could be a letter, a visit, different forms that show that you are welcome. This is missing here” (Interview, Germany).

The reasons for welcoming refugees varied. As far as government support and proactive approaches – especially where such work was voluntary – this was often connected to the politics or priorities of the party in power in local administrations. For instance, in Italy, local political traditions were the main difference regarding inclusion: Conservative-governed locales meant negative attitudes and worse relations compared to progressive-governed ones. Similarly, in Austria, a supportive political orientation was identified as an important factor. However, this was not a uniform pattern across all countries.

Of course, public opinion and government politics are intertwined, even if there is only overlap to a certain degree. In some localities, most notably in Turkey, the reason local authorities were hesitant to take action was the anti-migrant/refugee sentiment prevalent among their residents. But it was often more than politics. An aging and shrinking population, and related demographic and labour needs, tended to support positive views with regard to receiving post-2014 migrants, especially younger migrants. This receptivity helped intergroup relations and attitudes. Public opinion partly differed according to which type of migrants were considered as beneficial for the community; for instance, post-2014 migrants who were seen by locals in Turkey as more educated and a better fit with labour needs in the local tourism



sector were confronted with less opposition than their peers. At the same time, tight housing markets hurt positive relations, attitudes, and experiences, as did the perception of migrants as competitors for jobs, which was partly more prevalent in more disadvantaged areas.

4.3. Narratives in media and politics

Negative narratives in media and politics about migrants and refugees (in many countries, this was especially strong towards Muslims) were reported to hinder integration, even if this discourse took place at the national rather than the local level. Illustrating this, post-2014 migrants in the Netherlands reported feeling that other residents may view them negatively or be afraid of them, which led them to be hesitant to seek out encounters. Such negative narratives were pervasive during election campaigns. Whilst in all countries negative discourses played a role, these were especially pronounced in Turkey. Anti-migrant/refugee attitudes have increased as the country suffers from economic problems and election campaigns intensified. There have been several instances of anti-migrant mobilization, including the burning of migrants' apartments, encouragement from authorities to leave, and hate speech on social media; these events have hurt reciprocal relations and social interactions. Additionally, where authorities respond passively, this also contributed to a hostile environment for migrants.

4.4. The politicization of migration

Whilst the degree of politicization of migration varied across and within countries studied, interestingly, a higher degree of politicization served to both help and hinder integration. Especially after 2014-15, migration has become an increasingly polarizing issue (Dennison and Geddes 2019). Many EU countries have seen an outpouring of public support for refugees and a rise in support for the anti-immigration far right at the same time. The higher salience of the issue can both drive and strengthen public support for refugees as well as lead to a rise in support for anti-immigration actors.

A highly politicized discourse on migration (mainly anti-migration) hindered perceptions of inclusion and social interactions. At the same time, a more complicated picture emerged when looking across the case studies. In many countries, migration has become indeed more politicized, but this did not automatically imply that post-2014 migrants reported experiencing negative changes in the quality of their interactions. In some cases, this effect was also outweighed by the fact that local communities had become used to the presence of post-2014 migrants with the passage of time.

4.5. Social networks



As already noted, the overall dearth of intergroup interactions was striking across all the cases. However, social contacts emerged as a crucial factor linked to integration experiences. For some, networks of existing contacts, whether family or friends from the same origin country, another country, or reception centres, influenced post-2014 migrants' choice of where to settle in the first place. For more recent arrivals, inter- and intra-migrant contacts and networks were important sources of integration support, especially when it came to accessing information and services and finding work and housing. These connections may be other newcomers or people who moved a long time ago. Beyond logistics and survival, these contacts provided an important source of emotional support for post-2014 migrants. For many, other migrants or members of the same ethnic community made up a large share of their meaningful relationships in their new community. At the same time, tensions can exist among migrant communities, including between different groups of migrants and between more and less recent arrivals of the same nationality, both of which can limit networking potential.

Across the countries studied, new connections to long-term residents without a migration background were also helpful in navigating a new community and starting to put down roots. Relations with the native-born were important for accessing better housing and employment. Positive integration experiences were often connected to creating and maintaining social ties at school, civil society organizations, and especially workplaces.

“When you find employment, you find new friends...at work. You enter...a tradition. At work, we constantly talk. We drink coffee and talk. We talk about what happens in Sweden, we get more information” (Focus group, Sweden).

In these spaces, migrants could improve their language skills, make connections to better work opportunities, and develop a sense of belonging. Researchers identified the important role of civil society organizations and related activities, including buddy programmes and language activities, in supporting post-2014 migrants to expand their social networks. Yet, across the board, building meaningful intergroup relationships was often difficult – especially beyond volunteers – even where there was a positive attitude towards migrants.

Barriers existed due to a mix of individual and structural constraints, including a high entry barrier to the labour market, insufficient language training, and, for skilled migrants, credential recognition challenges. For those working, short-term, subsidized contracts, lone work, and functional segregation limited the integration potential of work (beyond income). There is a clear connection between social and economic integration: A lack of work leads to financial and social instability that makes it harder to make new contacts, but a degree of social integration (i.e., having meaningful contacts) tends to be a prerequisite for finding a job.

Learning the local language was necessary for most and seen as key to meaningful interactions, participation, and relationship building, meaning that those who had lower levels of proficiency often found this difficult, and vice versa. Post-2014 migrants reported feeling



insecure about interacting with the local community due to their language skills. In some places, English could serve as a common language, but the use of such a *lingua franca* varied across countries and communities studied. In addition to its importance for communication, learning the local language can be seen by locals as demonstrating a willingness to be part of the community. Thus, it also has an important symbolic role in addition to its practical one.

Yet, many post-2014 migrants faced challenges to language learning that often went unacknowledged by receiving communities. For instance, some were not eligible for courses due to their status; mental health challenges resulting from or compounded by displacement could make it more challenging; and a lack of childcare or transport (especially when courses were not nearby) and competing priorities like employment meant that it may be difficult to attend language training.

“I had trouble with language courses. I had to commute 2 hours by train. I had long waiting times in between. [...] Sometimes I had to wait an hour for a connecting train. That was really not good for me” (Interview, Austria).

Notably, the Covid-19 pandemic has further exacerbated the lack of interactions between post-2014 migrants and long-term residents, in addition to hindering language learning (Box 4).

Box 4: The Covid-19 Pandemic as a driver decreasing social interaction between post-2014 migrants and long-term residents

The Covid-19 pandemic tended to interrupt and limit social activities aiming to bring post-2014 migrants and local residents together. In many localities, in-person language classes were halted, meeting places were closed, older volunteers (who form an important segment of volunteers) paused their engagement because they feared the consequences of infection, and some work contracts were terminated. Administrative processes were delayed. Some services and activities moved online, but many migrant families (along with low-income native-born residents) had difficulties accessing the necessary digital tools (computers, internet access) at home.

“Because of the pandemic, we lost so many friends. There are people that I have not met in two years. I have never seen them again” (Interview, Germany).

“What we witnessed in our language courses for migrants is that the Corona period has really had a large impact on the language capabilities of newcomers. People really



lost a lot of their Dutch during this year and a half when we were not able to attend classes in real life” (Focus group, Belgium).

Unsurprisingly, then, post-2014 migrants interviewed expressed feeling that social distance had increased as a result of the pandemic. In all countries studied, it has led to less intergroup contact, albeit to differing degrees, partly depending on local government decisions to keep some services open. Given that, in many localities, social interactions were already quite weak before, the Covid-19 pandemic thus presented a severe obstacle for community building.

In some countries studied, most notably Germany and Austria, Covid-19 also led to social mobilization against measures to contain the pandemic. Whilst initially gathering heterogeneous groups of protesters, over time, more and more far-right, anti-immigrant groups joined these protests. Whilst Whole-COMM research did not capture any direct effects of these mobilizations on migrant integration in the localities studied, an indirect effect has to be accounted for, since it provided far-right parties and movements a new momentum and visibility in the community and increased social polarization overall.⁴ An additional factor to consider is that public debates in many countries focused on accusations that migrants exhibited lower Covid-19 vaccination rates.

Lastly, the willingness and availability of the long-term resident population is also an important factor:

“There has to be some interest from the Swedes... and I don’t see that. If I look at myself, I don’t have time. I go to work, play with my kids, tend my garden, and go to church. I don’t do so much. But if I look at my colleagues, no one has migrant friends” (Focus group, Sweden).

4.6. Places for encounter

⁴ In Austria’s 2023 regional elections, a strong link was observable between low vaccination rates in localities, (i.e., the number of locals being sceptical of Covid-19 prevention measures) and ballots cast for the anti-immigrant right. See for instance <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000143099065/fpoe-staubt-in-impfskeptischen-gemeinden-in-niederoesterreich-ab>.



When it comes to facilitating interactions and building networks, places for encounter were critical for bringing together post-2014 migrants and long-term residents. Across the countries studied, Whole-COMM researchers found that common spaces were critical for spurring interactions that could (ideally) lead to meaningful connections – in most cases, these were spaces with some type of structure or moderation. These common spaces provided a formal place for gathering and holding activities, which helped to foster feelings of inclusion. Conversely, a lack of places of encounter hindered positive integration experiences.

Encounters as such did not necessarily lead to quality interaction, but as mentioned before required some moderation. Especially in Sweden, Whole-COMM researchers found that spontaneous intergroup interactions rarely took place in public space, and intergroup contacts were rare without organized activities. Worse, interactions in informal settings (e.g., on the street or public transport) may be negative, characterized by experiences of indifference or even racism. In Poland, social relations were not common in any locality studied and were mainly for practical purposes (housing, jobs, and running errands). Some of these important spaces for encounter were institutional, such as schools. For adults, workplaces were a key space for interaction. However, in both schools and workplaces, the frequency and depth of interactions between post-2014 migrants and long-term residents varied across localities. In addition, by definition, some do not access these spaces, such as the unemployed or those of retirement age, meaning that encounters would need to take place somewhere else for these individuals.

“There are no natural meeting places. If you arrive to [locality] and want to be a part of society, then it is through employment. If you are not active in sports club activities, then it is a different thing” (Focus group, Sweden).

Civil society-run activities and solidarity spaces were a key place for people to meet, especially for post-2014 migrants to meet long-term residents, who in many cases were volunteers or staff. Buddy projects (where long-term residents help newcomers settle in), volunteering initiatives, trips, festivities, and one-stop-shops/reception houses (different from asylum reception) helped to foster friendships and inclusion. Trainings, courses, and other often NGO-run activities were also key spaces of encounter with long-term residents. In many cases, these NGOs were focused on migrant communities; however, in the Netherlands, neighbourhood houses (managed by the local welfare organization) were quite active and worked at the neighbourhood level to promote participation and prevent loneliness, extending their reach beyond newcomers and providing a space for post-2014 migrants to interact with long-term residents. As mentioned before, for a considerable share of post-2014 migrants, their only meaningful ‘local’ contacts were volunteers, underscoring the importance of such spaces and activities for networking. In the beginning, intergroup interactions usually took place in a formal or organized context (e.g., a language café, buddy project, or in the course of volunteer work), but over time, interactions may occur more spontaneously.

Leisure spaces, such as parks and playgrounds, also seemed particularly promising when it comes to intergroup interactions. In some cases, these were accessed for individual or family



use, while in others, leisure activities were organized, as in the case of some sports activities. Here, again, there were some limitations. The availability and accessibility of leisure spaces ranged, as did interest in, for example, participating in sports. The use of space was also shaped by economic factors, a lack of public space, and socioeconomic and generational gaps. In some cases, post-2014 migrants used certain types of spaces infrequently because of the cost, lack of public transport, or because they felt like outsiders. In Italy, for instance, post-2014 migrants tended to use public spaces that reflected diversity, such as shops owned by earlier migrants.

4.7. Individual factors

Individual factors, namely personal and group characteristics and personal motivations, also mattered in shaping attitudes, relations, and integration experiences. Individual characteristics, including those tied to membership in different social groups, can shape opportunities and experiences in the community related to interactions and integration. These include gender, religion, and ethnicity, as well as age, family situation, educational attainment, field of work (and whether someone is un/employed), and language(s) spoken. For example, people of colour and Muslim migrants often faced heightened discrimination. In addition, it was often observed that it was more difficult for adults to make contacts in a new community, especially if they did not have children, whereas children more readily made new connections in school. Clearly, these factors can intersect in ways that help or hinder integration for particular individuals. Generally speaking, some groups found integration easier: younger people, recognized refugees, those with higher educational attainment, and those in the country for a longer time (who often had higher proficiency in the local language). Some individual factors were also reported to put particular people at a disadvantage: being older, being Muslim, having an irregular status, having lower educational attainment, and having recently arrived.

“The language is difficult, not only the Dutch one, but language in general is difficult for the older people, the youngsters learn fast, that’s because the older people are busy in their head. You know there are problems, now I’m thinking about my country, it is not in my own hands. I had lands, olives, wine grapes, cherry trees and a house and it has been all taken away. But if one’s mind is clear then I would learn a bit, but that’s the issue, we are also old. Our grandparents said that the old bull cannot learn farming, but the young ones yes” (Interview, the Netherlands).

Legal status was an individual factor that played a pivotal role in integration experiences, not least because it (along with national immigration and integration policies) shaped what integration-related services, if any, post-2014 migrants could utilize, as well as access to the labour market. Insecurity, isolation, and mental health challenges were faced by people with an unclear legal status. Legal status was also connected to uncertainty regarding the ability to



stay and for how long. While in EU countries this was related to having an irregular status (and in Germany, also a 'tolerated' status), in Turkey, those in the protection system were also affected by status-related uncertainty. Persons seeking international protection complained of a long wait for a decision (also common in EU countries), meaning they were stuck in limbo. However, those under temporary protection – for significant periods of time – also felt uncertainty about their future given that this status can be cancelled at any time. Uncertainty, in addition to the stress it may cause, may mean less investment in settling in.

Time was another factor that played a role in relations and integration experiences, and it did so in multiple ways. First, the amount of time a migrant was in the country was often related to their level of proficiency in speaking the local language. Second, work hours and schedules limited the ability of some migrants, both in terms of participating in the community and in learning the language which, as was described above, can be a prerequisite for meaningful interactions with long-term residents. Those who worked overtime, had work and family responsibilities, and/or were experiencing precarious housing and working conditions had less time and energy for social life. Furthermore, with the free time they did have, migrants may choose to engage in activities that do not bring them into contact with long-term residents in the local community, such as traveling to larger cities nearby or spending time with other newcomers in their homes.

"In the beginning, it was difficult, really. I did not have any friends, did not speak German. After 1-1.5 years, I learned German, met people and made friends. Now it is good, I have my job, my family, my house. It was difficult, with becoming an entrepreneur, with German, taking the driving licence, but I have managed everything" (Interview, Austria).

"I don't have many contacts with the local residents, I would like to meet more people but it is not possible with the work I do and with the difficulty of the language" (Interview, Italy).

Individual goals and motivations are also an important shaping factor. In Austria, for example, while migrants were generally positive about their experiences settling into SMSTRAs, this was linked to their personal expectations and aspirations. Similarly, in Poland, attitudes and social relations partly depended on individuals' reasons for migrating. One key motivation related to integration experiences, and whether these were positive or negative, was whether or not an individual planned to stay or move on to another place. Reasons for staying included the existence of support networks, friendships, and good relations; having a job; enjoying a slow pace of life and nature; the inclusion of one's children; and seeing SMSTRAs as a good place to raise children. Reasons to move on (to a larger locale) included a lack of activities for a particular age group; higher education and job opportunities; and lack of a migrant community and experience with diversity.

"...a big city, with new people, with somewhere to go. This town is so small, we only have the natural preserve and the playground... I want some action



in my life. [...] If my mother moved out of here, I would never return” (Interview, Sweden).

“I would never move, I’m very comfortable here socially and mentally. It’s close to my work. I might change my place of living but not the town” (Interview, Austria).

“In my opinion, this is the best village in Germany. There is no better place. In big cities, where my parents would like to move, I’m worried because of my brothers. They would only cause trouble, because you cannot trust big cities. But here, they can study. It is small, but there is some choice here” (Interview, Germany).

“I like this place a lot. Of course, some things you cannot find, such as Iranian food, but apart from this, I like it. It is calm, not too crowded, and I like the nature. There is this lake, that is very good. If the weather is nice, we always go there with the children. We take a walk, meet friends, I really enjoy it” (Interview, Germany).

5. Whole-COMM walking tours

Based on the observation of a lack of interactions between long-term residents and migrants (see Section 3), a semi-experimental intervention was implemented in four localities in four countries (St. Pölten in Austria, Dessau in Germany, Cuneo in Italy, and Trelleborg in Sweden). In order to enhance the propensity of interaction and to foster awareness about post-2014 migrants’ lives, walking tours that focused on the topic of change in the particular locality were chosen as a method of intervention. An additional aim of these walking tours was to give back to the local communities and to disseminate Whole-COMM research findings.

The walking tour was chosen as a method based on insights from contact theory (Allport 1954). The idea behind this theory is that frequent and intensive direct contact between different social groups reduces prejudice and hostilities. This hypothesis has been tested in many studies and has proved to be consistent on a greater scale, and has been developed further in the last decades, for example, with a focus on specific groups including locals and migrants (Coninck, Rodríguez-de-Dios, & d’Haenens, 2021; Glorius et al., 2020). Besides direct contact, indirect contact between groups, such as information or stories about groups or group members, have also been found to impact attitudes toward others. In particular, stories that create empathy (Cameron & Rutland, 2006; Johnson, 2013) and facts that counter stereotypes (FitzGerald, Martin, Berner, & Hurst, 2019) seem promising ways to reduce



prejudice. In that regard, Paluck and Green (2009) stress the need to work with creative studies outside the laboratory, in real-life settings, in order to estimate their effects on people. Taking this finding as a starting point, the idea of the walking tour was to create a format where people could learn something about their SMsTRA, including about migrants and their lives in the locality, and see commonalities across groups.

The theme, however, deliberately did not focus on migration or migrant integration, in order to avoid reaching only those locals who already have an interest or engagement with migrants. Instead, the walking tours focused on a more generic theme (although closely connected to migration) to also reach out to participants that usually are not engaging or not willing to engage with these issues. The city walks thus incorporated the issue of migration and migrants into the bigger topic of change. The idea was to present migration as one aspect of change that has an impact on the locality but can only be understood in relation to other developments.

These walking tours happened between February and May 2023, and were conducted based on common guidelines, to which each country team added stops and information that was specific to the given locality. Each of the four country teams was instructed to cover the same 3 to 4 subthemes, all connected to the overall theme of change, whereas each subtheme included a mixture of migration and broader topics. These themes were economic development, mobility, community, and conflict/safety, each of which were represented by specific stops in the locality (e.g., a train station for mobility, a shut-down industrial building for economic development, a community centre for community, or a war memorial for conflict/safety) that were connected to these different themes.

Country researchers were asked to compose these walks utilising a mix of tools to facilitate interaction, including story-telling and the conveying of facts through quizzes, as well as disseminating insights from the Whole-COMM research. All walking tours included a set of reflection questions for each sub-theme to be discussed by the participants at the thematic stops. At the end of the tour, each country team was requested to discuss with, or if possible, survey, the participants as to whether their perspectives on the issues discussed changed in the wake of the tour. This included a specific set of questions about their perspectives on migration and diversity in the locality and their willingness to interact with post-2014 migrants or long-term residents (depending on to which category the participant belonged).

Participants for the walking tour were recruited through posters, social media, and local newspapers announcing the walk. In Austria, Germany, Italy, and Sweden, 25, 45, 34, and 10 participants took part, respectively. In Italy, this number included eight storytellers recruited from the local community to provide stories on issues related to the theme of change.

In Austria, a mixture of recent migrants (refugees from different countries) and long-term residents (including former guest-workers and their descendants) took part in the tour, which was co-organized by a civil society organization providing support to refugees. In Italy, two post-2014 migrants took part in the tour, which was co-hosted by an association involved in



migrant support activities in the locality. In Germany, no post-2014 migrants attended the tour; the migrant perspective was represented by five participants from a local migrant organization. In Sweden, despite efforts by the Swedish research team, no persons with a migrant background took part.

The researchers were encouraged to foster the active involvement of the local community if possible. The Italian research team, for that purpose, asked native-born residents to bring in their own personal experiences through stories at the different stops, and post-2014 migrants were encouraged to engage in chats with natives during the tour about their experiences of change.

During the walking tours, key issues that emerged during the Whole-COMM fieldwork research for work package five were raised by the researchers, including socio-economic differences between long-term residents and post-2014 migrants, precarious housing situations, residential segregation, and the lack of spaces for interaction between long-term residents and migrants. The walking tours provided a safe and open space to openly express perceptions about the phenomena of change in the locality; enabled participants to understand dynamics and challenges related to migrant integration; and helped to overcome biased perceptions of migration. Participants showed a keen interest in migration-related facts, especially if conveyed through trivia questions during the tour or quotes from the Whole-COMM interviews with post-2014 migrants. The walking tours also stimulated proactive reflection on how positive change in the city could be brought about when it comes to migration and a sense of community.

Based on the feedback by participants of the walking tours, overall, connecting topics to places that people frequent in their everyday lives allowed participants to see their city with fresh eyes. The tours also highlighted the importance of possibilities to establish social relations with the local community in fostering a sense of belonging. Whilst the post-walking tour surveys in the different countries revealed that participants' views on migration and diversity remained mixed, the overwhelming majority of participants in the tour did express their willingness after the tour to engage in a conversation with someone who has recently migrated to the locality (or, in the case of post-2014 migrants, to engage with long-term residents).

Given that, for practical reasons, the researchers could only collect participants' perspectives after the tour and this tour was a one-off intervention, it would be inaccurate to draw any conclusions about the impact and its sustainability of this walking tour on the propensity of post-2014 migrants and long-term residents to interact. But, drawing on the impressions gained during the tour, it can be noted that walking tours of this kind, especially if repeated in a locality on a regular basis, bear a promising potential to foster interaction and to create awareness on migration- and migrant integration-related issues.



6. Concluding summary

This working paper looked at attitudes and social relations between long-term residents and post-2014 migrants in SMsTRAs and how these influence migrant integration experiences. The analysis was based on data collected in 42 localities in nine European countries via participant observation, interviews, and focus groups. It showed that integration experiences in SMsTRAs take place in an environment that can be viewed along a continuum, with outright hostility and experiences of rejection at one end, inclusion on the other, and indifference by a 'silent majority' in between. Whilst in all localities studied, post-2014 migrants encounter inclusion and positive interactions in some spheres and (at the same time) exclusion in others, the research found an overall low degree of meaningful intergroup contact. Interactions between post-2014 migrants and long-term residents in many localities were scarce and difficult to establish.

A variety of factors had a positive or negative impact on attitudes, intergroup relations, and integration experiences across and within the localities studied, including, most notably, the support of civil society, the absence or presence of places and opportunities for encounter, and a variety of individual factors that shaped integration experiences. Civil society actors were important sources of support, served as a bridge between post-2014 migrants and locals, and at times filled critical gaps in integration services. Places and (organized) opportunities for encounter, were critical for fostering interactions between newcomers and long-term residents. Relevant individual factors included post-2014 migrants' age, legal status, educational attainment, and time.

Finally, integration experiences more generally were affected by the passage of time. Whilst time can have a positive impact on integration experiences of immigrants, it can also have the reverse effect. Research participants in many EU localities reported that post-2014 migrants are not as welcome as they were in 2014-15; in Turkey, post-2014 migrants encountered strongly increasing hostility over time. This temporal dimension is linked to key events: economic decline, the Covid-19 pandemic, and the arrival of Ukrainian refugees, which have all negatively affected the integration experiences of (non-Ukrainian) post-2014 migrants.



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This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101004714