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Recent developments in migrant integration policy

This chapter first provides an overview of the main changes in integration policy in OECD countries during the period 2022-23, against the context of new developments following the COVID-19 pandemic and the Ukrainian refugee crisis, triggered by Russia's full scale war, with a specific focus on gendered aspects of integration policy, the recognition of foreign qualifications, and the role of subnational governments in migrant integration.

In Brief

Key messages

- In many OECD countries, changes to integration policies have been made to ensure the integration of refugees from Ukraine, notably with respect to gendered aspects of integration policy and the recognition of foreign qualifications as well as the role of subnational governments in migrant integration.
- Citizenship reforms have again emerged as a main area for policy action. While some countries, such as Germany, Australia and the United States are relaxing and introducing flexibility to citizenship legislation, others are considering or implementing measures to tighten immigrants' access to citizenship, as is the case in Denmark, Norway and Sweden.
- Civic integration continues to be an increasingly important pillar of integration. Countries are notably enhancing tailor-made civic integration programmes combined with language learning, as well as expanding the groups of newly arrived migrants for which civic integration is mandatory.
- Heightened attention is paid to language training, especially to its vocational element. Many countries including Austria, Germany, Korea, Spain and Switzerland establish vocational language courses in specific sectors where demand is high.
- Countries are stepping up their efforts to combat discrimination, notably through implementing National Action Plans and adopting an intersectional approach. This issue is also emerging in countries with more recent immigration, such as in Latin America.
- Migrant women are increasingly in the policy focus. In addition to care responsibilities, growing attention has been paid to the particular risk faced by migrant women who suffer from gender-based violence (GBV), which can have far-reaching consequences on their ability to access education, work, or housing stability.
- With growing labour shortages and high inflows of highly educated immigrants, better valuing the qualifications of immigrants is high on the policy agenda. OECD countries have increasingly focused on speeding up the process of foreign credential recognition, streamlining the recognition system and making sure migrants are aware of the existence of such procedures and accompanied in the process. Digitalisation and online tools have played an important role in reducing the administrative burden.
- OECD countries are increasingly adopting a whole-of-society approach to integration, which has led to a growing prominence of local and regional governments in integration processes.
- Housing is a particularly pressing issue faced by municipalities in the context of migrant integration. Subnational authorities are taking steps to expand reception facilities and access to affordable housing for immigrants, but central governments are key for funding, regulation, and dispersal.
- Subnational authorities have also been establishing new fora for co-operation in the field of integration to share good practices, pool resources, and to act in a co-ordinated manner.

Introduction

Over the past year policy developments have been shaped by the Ukrainian refugee crisis triggered by Russia's full-scale war, which further highlighted three crucial integration challenges examined in this chapter. Countries have increasingly focused on the integration of migrant women, recognising their specific integration needs. The assessment and recognition of foreign qualifications has been pushed to the top of the integration policy agenda, as it constitutes one of the main barriers to skilled migrants' integration into the labour market, especially in a context of unprecedented labour market shortages across the OECD. Finally, as OECD countries are increasingly adopting a whole-of-society approach to integration, the role of subnational governments has gained prominence. Notably, housing challenges have further emphasised the need for efficient co-ordination and communication between national and subnational governments. Before turning to each of these particular challenges in more detail, this chapter first provides an overview of other key developments in integration policy.

Main developments in integration policy

Several countries are relaxing citizenship legislation while others are making it more restrictive

In 2022/23, there has been renewed interest in citizenship policies. Most countries view the acquisition of citizenship as a catalyst for the economic, social, and political integration of immigrants, by incentivising them to invest in a future in the country and providing them with rights that contribute to bridging the gaps with the native-born. Opposing perspectives consider naturalisation as the ultimate reward for successful integration. The latter view implies designing rigid and restrictive naturalisation policies based on long residency requirements and demanding language and civic tests. While most OECD countries share the first view, several countries have made important legislative changes to tighten immigrants' access to citizenship.

Germany's government published in 2023 a draft legislation aimed at significantly facilitating the acquisition of citizenship for immigrants. If adopted, the reform will allow the acquisition of multiple citizenship to provide greater incentives for immigrants to become German citizens. Native-born children of foreign-born parents will also be granted birthright citizenship provided at least one parent has lived in Germany for five years or more and has unlimited right of residence. Furthermore, the required duration of residence will be lowered from eight to five years for those with a qualified right of residence, or to three years under certain conditions, particularly for those well integrated. In addition, language requirements should be eased for certain groups of immigrants. Following adoption of the legislation, naturalisation campaigns should be organised at the Länder level.

Some countries choose to ease citizenship acquisition for certain groups of migrants. For example, Australia facilitated pathways to naturalisation for New Zealand citizens. Under an amendment enforced in January 2023, New Zealand citizens arriving in Australia holding a Special Category visa will no longer need to apply for a permanent visa before becoming eligible for citizenship.

A few countries introduced flexibility in their naturalisation processes. The United States recently introduced an automatic 24-month extension of green card validity for candidates who have filed an application for citizenship. In addition, the United States announced in 2023 the expansion of the Citizenship and Integration Grant Programme, which will provide up to USD 25 million in grants to programmes aimed at preparing immigrants for naturalisation and promote civic integration through civic courses, language, and history courses. Ireland introduced a scorecard approach further clarifying what information applicants must provide to establish their identity and residence history in Ireland. Immigrants

can now use a variety of documents and be sure they have enough evidence to prove their identity and residence before sending their application.

While the general trend among OECD countries has been to offer facilitations regarding the naturalisation process, a few countries are moving towards tightening the access to citizenship. In 2022, Norway raised the residence requirements from seven to eight years for all immigrants except refugees. Depending on immigrants' income, this required duration may be lowered to six years. In addition, the level of Norwegian language knowledge required to be naturalised was raised from A2 to B1. Similarly, the Swedish Government is currently considering harshening the naturalisation requirements, including by extending the residence duration requirement as well as tightening the language requirements.

Estonia and Latvia have taken steps to allow for the revocation of citizenship from naturalised citizens who present a threat to public order or national security.

Civic integration continues to gain importance

Civic integration is an increasingly important aspect of integration policy among OECD countries. Measures fostering the civic integration of immigrants serve to ensure immigrants know, understand, and respect the host country's history, institutions, and shared values (OECD, 2023^[11]). Civic integration further promotes social cohesion and allows immigrants to better take part in the functioning of the host society. The spectrum of civic integration measures is broad, from providing civic courses to fostering cultural and social contacts with the native-born population, as well as allowing migrants to participate in elections. For example, Luxembourg recently amended its Electoral Law to abolish the five-year residency requirement for foreign nationals wishing to register on the electoral rolls for communal elections.

Countries also emphasise the importance of designing tailor-made integration programmes. The new Integration and Civic Integration Act adopted in Flanders (Belgium), in force since March 2022, includes a fourth pillar focused on enhancing immigrants' social networks and participation in society. It offers newly arrived migrants a 40-hour tailor-made programme which may take various forms: a buddy programme, a language internship in a company, association or local government, volunteer work, and community work. In the Netherlands, the new Civic Integration Act, which came into force in January 2022, proposes three different civic integration pathways provided by Municipalities and tailored to individuals based on a comprehensive intake process. Each pathway combines language learning and civic courses and is adapted to migrants' language level and educational attainment.

To make sure migrants who need it the most do receive integration services, some countries are making integration programmes accessible or mandatory to new groups of migrants. In the Netherlands, refugees and family migrants are obliged to follow an integration programme provided by the municipality. The Brussels region of Belgium recently made civic integration courses obligatory for family members of employment-based permit holders who have been staying in the region for over three months. They are also required to enrol in a course within six months of receiving their permit.

In Germany, several programmes are implemented to promote democracy, prevent radicalisation, or encourage young immigrants or descendants of immigrants to promote political participation. In Austria, the compulsory values and orientation courses were extended to three days from January 2022.

Heightened attention is paid to language training, and especially to its vocational element

The importance of providing language training to migrants is acknowledged by all OECD countries as it improves access to the labour market, to social services and helps building social ties. However, countries increasingly perceive the added value of combining language courses with vocational training. Vocational language training is sometimes difficult to implement, as the number of migrants interested in a particular

occupation or sector may be too low for providers to invest in such regular trainings (OECD, 2023^[1]). Yet, growing labour market shortages often resulting from skills mismatches have, among other factors, led OECD countries to pay attention to vocational aspects of language training and of integration measures in general.

In Germany, language and vocational language courses used to be accessible to asylum seekers who came from countries with a protection rate of at least 50%, thus excluding most asylum seekers from integration courses. The new Act on the Introduction of Opportunity Residence now provides immediate access to Federal-funded modular language and vocational language training, up to level C2 of the Common European Reference Framework (CEFR) to all asylum seekers regardless of origin. These courses may also be combined with vocational qualifications and practical work placement. Similarly, Austria expanded the range of German courses to include specialised language courses for specific sectors with labour shortages, i.e. restaurant and catering, hotel, tourism, and retail trade sectors.

A further trend is to facilitate access to vocational training, sometimes combined with general language training. Switzerland for example increased the funding allocated to integration through committing a further CHF 250 million for language courses and apprenticeships for foreigners from 2024 to 2027. In Spain, recent legislative changes opened the possibility for undocumented migrants who have been living in the country for at least two years access to access temporary residence if they complete vocational training courses and possess minimum knowledge in Spanish.

In Korea, the government announced plans to provide long-term vocational training courses for E-9 visa holders (non-professional visas) combined with language courses to enhance their technical skills and knowledge of the Korean language and culture. Currently, E-9 visa workers only benefit from a three-day vocational course. A pilot programme in the shipbuilding industry was launched in 2023.

Countries are also raising target levels in terms of language knowledge. The Netherlands for example raised the expected language level for newcomers to level B1 of the CEFR. Australia enhanced the resources allocated to the *Adult Migrant English Programme (AMEP)* to include English Ready Booklets to assist individuals with little or no educational experience, as well as the AMEC Digital Literacies Framework to activate digital literacies in adult English. The government will provide close to USD 20 million in additional funding over four years from 2022-23 to the AMEP to support adult learners with innovative learning solutions. Finland has renewed and adopted its core curriculum for integration training in 2022, placing higher emphasis on language awareness.

Countries adopted new National Action Plans to address racism and discrimination

Countries continue combatting discrimination notably through adopting National Action Plans. As part of the EU-wide initiative led by the European Commission to fight racism, several EU countries implemented National Action Plans Against Racism (NAPAR). The EU Action Plan Against Racism explicitly highlighted the need to foster an intersectional approach to antiracism and antidiscrimination policies. In July 2022, Belgium approved a new NAPAR for 2021-24 which comprises over 70 measures within the field of equal opportunities, work, economy, asylum and migration, health, justice, police, foreign affairs, media and mobility. France introduced a new plan for 2023-26 aimed at fighting racism, antisemitism and discrimination related to origin. The Plan pursues five major ambitions: (i) measuring the reality of racism antisemitism and discrimination, (ii) naming the reality of hate, (iii) better educate and train, (iv) sanctioning the perpetrators, and (v) supporting the victims. This plan places particular emphasis on youth and on protecting young people from hateful messages. Among the 80 measures exposed in the Plan, several intend to fight discrimination on the labour market, notably by generalising correspondence tests, an experimental method to assess the extent of discrimination in firms.

Ireland also took important steps in the fight against discrimination and launched its National Action Plan Against Racism in 2023, the first one in 15 years, aimed at “eliminating racism in all its forms in Ireland”.

Main objectives include protecting victims from racism and hate crimes, addressing ethnic inequalities, ensuring minorities' participation in all areas of society, measuring the impacts of racism through efficient data collection, and implementing policies, programmes and legislation combatting racism.

In Germany, the Federal Anti-Discrimination Agency was strengthened through the appointment in 2023 of a Federal Anti-Discrimination Officer.

Colombia presented a new National Development Plan 2022-26 which places emphasis on implementing campaigns to prevent xenophobia and discrimination. In 2023, Canada, the United States and Mexico together signed the Declaration on the North American Partnership for Equity and Racial Justice, by which the three countries committed to each affirmatively advance equal and racial justice, by rooting out the barriers to equal opportunity that marginalised communities continue to face. They also committed to enhance co-operation, notably through establishing a Trilateral Racial Equity and Inclusion Expert Network to facilitate exchange of information, good practices, and innovative strategies.

Fundamental overhaul of integration frameworks

A number of OECD countries enacted more global changes to their integration legislation, some of which occurred following delays caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The new Integration and Civic Integration Act in Flanders (Belgium), includes in addition to the aforementioned changes regarding civic integration, also a number of significant modifications regarding the composition of, and eligibility for, integration measures. Notably, asylum seekers no longer qualify for integration measures. The integration track is expanded by two new pillars: in addition to civic orientation and Dutch L2 language learning, migrants will have to register at the Flemish PES (third pillar) and enrol in a social networking and participation project (fourth pillar). This individualised integration programme is no longer free of charge and immigrants are expected to pay up EUR 360 for integration measures.

In light of high immigration intakes in recent years, several OECD countries in Latin America have recently been moving forward with new strategic frameworks on integration. Costa Rica adopted the third National Integration Plan 2023-27 based on the following pillars: education, health, diversity, fighting vulnerability and strengthening institutional co-operation. Chile's President approved in June 2023 a new law on migration that places emphasis on the long-term integration and socio-economic inclusion of immigrants. The National Planning Department of Colombia approved in July 2022 the new "Strategy for the integration of the Venezuelan migrant population as a development factor for the country" to adapt the institutional response to the social, economic, and cultural integration needs of millions of Venezuelan migrants in the country and harness their long-term economic contribution. The strategy emphasises seven lines of action including (i) increasing the supply of integration services, (ii) strengthening the prevention strategies related to vulnerabilities, (iii) focussing on the economic integration of Venezuelan migrants, (iv) fostering environments promoting social and cultural integration, (v) expanding the capacity of institutions in charge of the care and integration of migrants, (vi) defining a financing strategy to guarantee their integration and impact on development and (vii) reinforce the data infrastructure, information exchange and evaluation processes. About USD 13.3 million is allocated to implement this strategy.

Several OECD countries announced important plans and proposals to pass new legislation on migration and integration. In Finland, a comprehensive reform of the Integration Act is planned for 2025, providing early-stage integration services including customised integration plans, multilingual orientation, education, and other services aimed at facilitating and reinforcing transition to work. Luxembourg presented its draft law on "intercultural living together" that will repeal the law on "the integration of foreigners". Four instruments are put forward: (i) the National Action Plan providing strategic orientation, (ii) the Citizen's Pact for intercultural living together, (iii) the Programme for intercultural living together and (iv) the Municipal Pact for intercultural living together. The fight against racism and all forms of discrimination at the local level is a crucial aspect of the law. The development of a new Migrant Integration Strategy is currently underway in Ireland by 2024.

Welcoming and integrating Ukrainian refugees

A major integration challenge across OECD countries in 2022/23 has been providing support to the large numbers of people fleeing Ukraine. In the European Union, the Temporary Protection Directive grants holders of temporary protection immediate access to education and to employment and self-employment. Other non-EU OECD countries have enacted similar emergency plans allowing refugees to access the same rights. These exceptional measures make it easier for Ukrainian refugees to access the labour market compared to other refugee groups. In this context, most OECD countries have utilised their existing integration systems and simply extended the coverage of integration support provided to refugees to include displaced Ukrainians on the same basis, with some exceptions (e.g. Sweden, France). Several countries put specific emphasis on language courses and vocational language training. For example, the United Kingdom allocated GBP 11.5 million to provide intensive English courses to around 10 000 Ukrainians.

The majority of Ukrainian refugees are tertiary educated, as first administrative data collected in OECD receiving countries can attest (OECD, 2023^[2]). In this context, early assessment of their skills and recognition of their qualifications is critical to allow them to continue working in their field, further enhancing their skills to contribute both to the host economy and to Ukraine's future reconstruction efforts. In addition to the obstacles to recognition detailed above, many Ukrainian refugees were working in regulated professions prior to migration, especially in the health and education sectors, which require official recognition of foreign qualifications. To better match the characteristics and needs of the Ukrainian refugee population, some OECD countries have taken steps to make adjustments to their recognition systems, while others have implemented targeted new measures for this group.

Several countries have streamlined and accelerated the recognition of qualification procedures for beneficiaries of temporary protection, usually by shortening processing times and removing some requirements for specific occupations. For example, Italy, Poland, the Slovak Republic and Spain to the processing time for the recognition of qualifications for medical professionals from Ukraine. Germany and the Czech Republic have implemented fast-track procedures to facilitate the recognition of foreign qualifications for Ukrainian teachers. Iceland and Norway have taken steps to speed up the recognition of academic qualifications by introducing automatic approval of qualifications recognitions for Ukrainians with a tertiary education degree. Portugal has allowed authorities to conduct case-by-case assessments and exempt beneficiaries of temporary protection from the obligation to provide an academic diploma, certificate, or licence. Official translation of documents is no longer required. To facilitate access to regulated professions, some countries have removed qualification requirements or have implemented expedited evaluations. In Lithuania, Ukrainian refugees are exempt from mandatory language requirements for several jobs, leaving evaluation of the knowledge of the language to the employers' discretion. Similarly, Austria and Germany eased the requirements to hire teachers. Some countries have additionally waived the fees associated with recognition of qualifications for Ukrainian refugee beneficiaries of temporary protection. This is for example the case in Hungary, Portugal and Spain.

At the same time, many countries are unsure how to proceed in connection to integrating Ukrainians. The displacement of Ukrainians is still perceived as temporary by host countries, Ukraine, and the refugees themselves. This creates a situation where conventional integration systems, which are designed to support longer-term settlement, may not adequately meet the needs of Ukrainians in host countries. Consequently, there is a need to explore alternative frameworks for approaching integration in the context of Ukrainian refugees (Box 3.1).

Box 3.1. Dual intent approach gives Ukrainian refugees access to integration support without hampering a possible return to Ukraine

As Russia's full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine continues into its second year, host societies are looking for ways to better support displaced Ukrainians in the longer term. At the same time, the nature and scope of support provided may not align with their usual integration practices as many Ukrainians are still expected to return to home when the situation permits. Moreover, their return is also widely seen as critical for the reconstruction of Ukraine and there are concerns that wrong types of integration support may undermine refugees' return potential.

Adopting a dual intent integration approach could offer a solution to balance these conflicting needs and circumstances. This means that support measures and activities aim to facilitate rapid socio-economic inclusion, enabling Ukrainian refugees to become self-sufficient, rebuild their lives, and develop their human capital to improve their future prospects, regardless of their country of residence. At the same time, this consideration actively seeks to minimise potential barriers to their return in both host and home countries. Close co-operation between host countries and Ukraine will be essential to develop and implement relevant and appropriate measures to achieve this.

While there have been isolated instances of similar approaches in the past, such as Norway implementing integration measures with a focus on return for Bosnian refugees in the 1990s, these are relatively new considerations for most OECD countries. Some potential examples of dual intent measures between host countries and the Ukrainian Government include investing in the human capital development of displaced Ukrainians, facilitating the recognition of skills and qualifications, providing Ukrainian language training for children and youth in host countries, establishing financial and digital connections with Ukraine, and ensuring the availability of remigration and mobility pathways.

Successive crises further highlighted the need to focus on gendered aspects of integration policy

Migrant women face specific integration challenges, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the Ukrainian refugee crisis, which have prompted specific policy actions

While women make up just over half of all migrants in OECD countries, they face additional and persistent barriers hindering their social and economic integration in the host society. Foreign-born women overall exhibit lower employment rates and higher unemployment rates than foreign-born men and native-born women. Refugee women, who face additional challenges, fare even worse on the labour market than other foreign-born women. OECD work has shown that they suffer from a "triple disadvantage" reflecting challenges related to gender, migrant status and forced displacement that add up and reinforce each other (Liebig and Tronstad, 2018^[3]).

Several factors can explain this disadvantage. Although women migrate on increasingly diverse grounds, 60% of migrants who come to OECD countries for family reasons are women. Family migrants are less likely to immediately have a job or enrol in an educational programme and therefore have less prior attachment to the labour market and tend to have lower language skills and social networks (OECD, 2020^[4]). They may also experience more difficulties to benefit from integration support measures for new arrivals. Care responsibilities and family constraints primarily drive gender gaps in immigrants' integration (see Chapter 5 for more details). OECD work has also shown that improving the socio-economic integration of migrant women is also crucial to prevent inter-generational transmission of labour market disadvantage (OECD, 2017^[5]).

The COVID-19 pandemic and the Ukrainian refugee crisis further highlighted gender-specific integration challenges. During the COVID-19 pandemic immigrant women were overrepresented in sectors hard hit by the crisis. School closures and quarantines placed a disproportionate burden on women, especially on those from disadvantaged backgrounds with small children, who are often those whose spouse could not telework. Quarantines also increased their risk of being exposed to intimate partner violence (OECD, 2022^[6]).

More recently, the unusual gender profile of Ukrainian refugees – women and children make up close to 90% of refugees – has entailed specific labour market integration challenges for this group. While high education levels and the exceptional support provided by temporary protection schemes strengthen Ukrainian women’s integration prospects compared to other refugees, other factors may at the same time hinder their labour market integration. These include care burdens further exacerbated by the separation of family units, risks of exploitation and uncertainties about the length of stay (OECD, 2023^[7]).

While most OECD countries have adopted integration policies towards migrant women in some way, recent crises have pushed the issue on top of the integration policy agenda. Currently, about half of OECD countries include gender aspects in their mainstream integration policies. This move towards gender mainstreaming has been ongoing for many years for a few countries such as Sweden or Canada, while it is more recent for others. Italy adopted in 2020 a gender mainstreaming approach in its integration policies.

Conversely, national policies that promote gender equality may also take into account the specific challenges faced by migrants. For example, Australia recently adopted the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022-32, which incorporates appropriate responses to support women from diverse ethnic backgrounds.

Several countries also designed integration measures or programmes specifically targeted towards migrant women. For example, Germany developed the programme “MY TURN”, tailored specifically for women with a migration experience. The programme primarily aims at reducing their integration barriers and providing them with skills and vocational training, counselling, and networking services etc. Such measures are also being implemented in some countries that do not specifically refer to gender in their national integration policy, for example through targeting vulnerable groups more broadly.

Several countries recently took steps to reflect on integration barriers faced by migrant women and on the potential ways to take them into account in integration policy plans. The Finnish Comprehensive Reform of the Act on the Promotion of Immigrant Integration aims at strengthening the labour market integration and the attachment of migrant women to Finnish society. In Italy, following a serious deterioration of the situation of migrant women in the society prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic, the government has been pushing the integration of migrant mothers on top of its integration policy agenda. In Ireland, the specific needs of migrant women will be fully integrated into the new upcoming Migrant Integration Strategy. Switzerland will also pay increased attention to the integration of migrant women in the next phase of the Cantonal Integration Programmes 2024-27. OECD countries intervene in many areas to promote migrant women’s integration. These especially include language, skills and vocational training and active labour market policies targeted towards migrant women. Recognising that care responsibilities and family constraints are often the main barriers to the integration of migrant women, countries have been primarily focused on alleviating care-related barriers to labour market participation and to stable and quality employment. Chapter 5 of this report provides detailed policy developments regarding the labour market integration of migrant mothers in OECD countries.

Preventing gender-based violence is gaining prominence in integration policy

Migrant women, and especially refugees, may face a particular risk of gender-based violence and exploitation. During the migration journey, some migrants face situations where they are more vulnerable

to violence (Calderón-Jaramillo et al., 2020^[8]). This can seriously hinder their long-term integration prospects, through long-lasting consequences on their physical and psychological state. OECD countries have established various types of measures to protect migrant women against gender-based violence (GBV) and are progressively increasing the integration budgets dedicated to such initiatives.

Several countries provide women with information and integration courses focused on gender-based violence against migrant women. Through its Settlement and Engagement and Transition Support, Australia aims at identifying and supporting migrant women at risk and provides information and training sessions about respectful relationships, legal rights, and sources of support. In Austria, comprehensive advice for migrant women is offered through Protection Against Violence Centres and Intervention agencies. In 2022, Austria increased by EUR 1 million the budget dedicated to national integration specifically to implement 14 projects combatting violence against women. Canada created in 2017 the federal Gender-Based Violence Strategy to address gaps in support for diverse populations including immigrant women. In this framework, the Gender-Based Violence Settlement Strategy Project aims at building capacity and networks to better support newly arrived immigrant women through raising awareness, providing online courses entitled “Bridges to Safety”. In 2022, the Strategy received an additional USD 2 million funding for five years. In France, the Ministry of Interior funds associations that support newly arrived foreign national women victims of gender-based violence and provides specific training to social workers responsible for accompanying these groups.

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, gender-based violence against migrant women has increased in a number of OECD countries. As a result, several initiatives were implemented, such as the creation of multilingual helplines and counselling services. In Finland, for example, a new telephone helpline and chat services were created to support migrant women victims of domestic violence.

Forcibly displaced women face additional risks of being exposed to gender-based violence. Against this backdrop, Colombia made policy efforts to address gender-based violence against Venezuelan refugee women. The lack of medical insurance access for migrants is an additional barrier for migrant women’s integration. The Colombian Ministry of Health and Social Protection issued a decree making the migrant population a priority medical insurance affiliation population and had provided as of 2022 more than 18 million services to Venezuelan migrants, focusing on care for pregnant women, early childhood and gender-based violence. Following the adoption of the new Migration Act, which places emphasis on the special protection for victims of gender-based violence, Chile’s National Migration Service has taken steps to raise awareness and provide information to migrant women on their rights and on the prevention of domestic violence.

In the case of Ukrainian refugees, the risk of being exposed to gender-based violence has notably been exacerbated by the atypical role private citizens play in hosting Ukrainian refugees in their homes. Countries have been vigilant since the beginning of the crisis. For example, Poland developed a framework in co-operation with the national police to screen private organisations and individuals volunteering to support Ukrainian refugees. In Luxembourg, house visits are organised in cases of suspected labour or sexual exploitation.

Countries are increasingly aware of the necessity to improve the recognition of foreign qualifications

Efficient recognition of foreign qualifications is crucial to ensure migrants’ long-term integration in the labour market and full utilisation of skills

In OECD countries, around two in three immigrants have obtained their diplomas abroad. Yet, evidence shows that immigrants with foreign qualifications face substantial barriers on the labour market, notably, finding stable and quality jobs that match their skills. While educational attainment improves access to the

labour market, immigrants with tertiary degrees are less likely to be employed than their native-born counterparts, while the opposite is true among low educated individuals. They are also more likely to occupy a job that requires skills below their level of education: more than one-third of highly skilled immigrants in OECD countries are overqualified for their occupation. Within the European Union, 47% of highly educated immigrants are either overqualified or not in employment, against 30% of the native-born population (OECD/European Commission, 2023^[9]). In almost all OECD countries, immigrants who graduated in the host country are much more likely to be employed than immigrants with foreign degrees. Even controlling for differences in performances of education systems, this difference in labour market outcomes still holds (OECD, 2017^[10]).

The difficulties for immigrants to have their qualifications valued and recognised contribute to immigrants' overqualification and lower employment. This has far-reaching consequences on long-term integration, but also comes at an economic cost to the host society.

Yet, while virtually all OECD countries have established some possibility for immigrants to have their foreign qualifications recognised, processes to assess skills and recognise foreign qualifications remain complex and often lack efficiency, transparency, and universal access. In regulated professions and trades, holding a foreign qualification represents a significant barrier to employment as a specific registration, certificate or licence awarded by the relevant professional licencing body is generally required and varies significantly across countries. In non-regulated professions, holding a foreign qualification is still an implicit barrier, especially because employers are less familiar with foreign education curriculums and institutions.

Recent policy efforts primarily aim at speeding up and streamlining the recognition of foreign qualifications while raising awareness about procedures

Against this backdrop, the assessment and recognition of foreign qualifications has been high on the integration policy agenda for several years (OECD, 2017^[10]). Countries continue to focus on speeding up and streamlining the recognition system. Greece passed a law in 2022, making the process for recognition of foreign degrees faster and more efficient. The recognition of academic degrees from a list of more than 3 500 foreign higher education institutions is now automatic and the recognition process should not take more than two months for basic degrees. In Chile, three institutions are responsible for the recognition of foreign qualifications – the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Employment, and the University of Chile. Each of these institutions have different approval rates and processing times. In an effort to improve the low rate of migrants applying to recognition of foreign degrees, the new Migration and Aliens Act, adopted in 2021 grants the possibility for other higher education institutions to participate in the process.

The current context of persisting labour shortages pushed OECD countries to facilitate the recognition of foreign qualifications. Improvements made to the process are often targeted and restricted to certain (shortage) professions. To address important labour shortages in the medical sector, Germany passed a draft of the Nursing Studies Strengthening Act, which includes a simplification and standardisation of the recognition of foreign nursing qualifications and training. More specifically, the government plans to regulate the list of required documents for the recognition process and propose alternatives to equivalence tests, such as adaptation courses or knowledge-based assessments. Austria issued a decree in 2022 by which qualified healthcare professionals can go through an accelerated approval procedure to have their qualifications validated.

Digitalisation plays an important role in simplifying recognition processes and relieving immigrants from administrative burden. The COVID-19 crisis further highlighted the importance of online tools. In 2022, the Spanish Government launched an online platform dedicated to foreign degree recognition. Foreign nationals are now able to submit their documents online to prove the equivalence of their qualifications with Spanish standards. Similarly, Denmark has established an online competence portfolio (“My Competence Portfolio”) to help migrants describe and document qualifications.

Increasing awareness and transparency regarding recognition procedures and making sure immigrants are accompanied in the process is also crucial to ensure efficiency. Information about how to obtain recognition is often not accessible to migrants. To foster transparency, Germany established in 2020 a Service Centre for Professional Recognition (ZSBA) which support applicants abroad in the recognition procedure.

Countries also rely on bilateral agreements to improve skill mobility and reduce barriers linked to the skills recognition process. For example, Australia signed in 2023 an agreement with India establishing a mechanism for the mutual recognition of qualifications. In 2022, the United Kingdom's Cabinet also approved a MoU with India on mutual recognition of some academic qualifications.

Subnational governments are key partners to national governments in migrant integration

For nearly a decade now, OECD countries have increasingly adopted a whole-of-society approach to integration, emphasising that migrant integration is a multi-level and multi-stakeholder process (OECD, 2020^[11]; 2023^[1]). This has led to the growing prominence of local and regional governments in migrant integration across the OECD, which is likely to continue in the coming years. In 2023, for instance, the Finnish Parliament passed a comprehensive reform of the Integration Act that will over the coming years transfer much greater overall responsibility for integration services to municipalities than ever before. Similar trends can be also seen elsewhere, including in Luxembourg where the new draft law on intercultural living together attributes a more central role to municipalities to promote access to information, civic participation, and community life at the local level.

Recent crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the Ukrainian refugee crisis, have highlighted both the benefits and challenges of subnational governments being at the front line of migrant integration (Box 3.2) In the context of the pandemic, it was often easier and more cost-effective to transition into online service provision – notably language training – in countries where there are strong centralised integration frameworks in place, such as Germany, than in countries where integration support is strongly decentralised, for instance, Norway (OECD, 2022^[12]). Local and municipal autonomy without a centralised framework creates further challenges, such as major disparities in content and availability of integration support nationwide (OECD, 2023^[1]). Furthermore, there is a significant variation in past experiences with providing integration support among municipalities, resulting in differing levels of skills and know-how across cities and regions. For instance, during the Ukrainian refugee crisis, a considerable number of smaller cities and regions in Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, which had little to no prior experience in offering integration support to foreigners, suddenly found themselves faced with a significant influx of refugees.

In turn, some OECD countries, such as Colombia, have tried to strengthen centralised integration management to balance responsibilities better and to minimise regional differences in integration support. These recent developments point to the value of complementary national and subnational integration frameworks and structures to be in place concurrently to provide optimal integration support for migrants and refugees.

Box 3.2. Cities supporting refugees during the Ukrainian refugee crisis

From the start, cities and municipalities have been leading the response to the Ukrainian refugee crisis. This has been in part out of necessity as the inflow of Ukrainian refugees has impacted metropolitan areas disproportionately. In Poland, for example, the refugee flows prompted a rapid expansion of cities during the first two months of the crisis: the population of Warsaw grew by 15%, Kraków by 23%, Gdańsk by 34%, while the population of Rzeszów increased by 53% (Wojdat and Cywiński, 2022^[13]). Other countries, including Germany and France, have also noted the tendency of Ukrainian refugees to take residence in cities, despite centralised efforts to promote wider dispersal (OECD, 2022^[14]).

Reaching the new Ukrainian arrivals and ensuring their access to good quality information as soon as possible has been a priority in most cities. During the first months of the crisis, one-stop-shops became a common practice across cities in the OECD. Many cities of different sizes, including Dublin (Ireland), Nantes (France), Paris (France), Regina (Canada), Stockholm (Sweden) and Tampere (Finland), established them and similar reception hubs to co-ordinate information-provision to arriving Ukrainians, register them, and to ease access to the different support services. In some instances, cities were also able to leverage existing digital platforms and tools to reach Ukrainian refugees. In Germany, several cities used the Integreat app to reach the new Ukrainian arrivals and to offer integration support. Nuremberg, for instance, uses the app to provide direct and easy access to a wide range of information, including on how to apply for social benefits, cultural events and recreational activities, and German language classes.

Local authorities' knowledge of their communities solidified their role as providers of vital frontline services. Within days following the start of the full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine, the city of Tallinn (Estonia) opened a refugee welcome centre to address immediate needs such as primary assistance, emergency housing, legal aid, psychological and other medical support, and offered adaptation counselling to facilitate refugees' stay in the city. In Belgium, cities were particularly closely involved with organising and co-ordinating access to private housing, including screening host families, matching displaced people with suitable hosts, and carrying out home visits. In most Polish cities, municipalities worked closely with local private partners to repurpose existing facilities to accommodate the large numbers of Ukrainian arrivals. The city of Rzeszów, for instance, partnered with hotels and the owners of other large commercial properties to open temporary shelters.

Yet their involvement has not been limited to reception-related support and cities have continued to take an active role also in medium-to-longer term response, especially in connection to facilitating access to employment. The local authorities in Salzburg, Austria, are working closely with the local employment agency, local businesses, employers' organisations, and the Chamber of Commerce to identify job needs, simplify the rules, and facilitate the matching process for available jobs. Meanwhile, in 2022, the city of Riga (Latvia) organised 14 job fairs at the Riga Support Centre for Ukrainian Residents, bringing together local employers and Ukrainians looking for a job.

Housing remains a challenge for municipalities across the OECD

One of the most pressing challenges faced by municipalities in the context of migrant integration is housing. Safe, secure, and affordable housing is a fundamental human need and essential to health and overall well-being, providing a base for newcomers from which to seek employment, pursue educational opportunities, and make connections with the wider community. Yet when it comes to housing, migrants often find themselves in a disadvantaged situation compared to the native-born population and many live in bad housing conditions. More than one in six immigrants live in overcrowded accommodation in OECD countries – a rate that is 70% higher than that of the native-born in the EU – with the disparities being widest in Colombia, Korea, Southern European countries (particularly Italy and Greece), and Nordic

countries (OECD/European Commission, 2023^[9]). Housing quality, distribution and accessibility can also directly impact migrant concentration and segregation, which is associated with poorer overall integration outcomes longer term (Liebig and Spielvogel, 2021^[15]). While the affordability-related challenges are not necessarily specific to immigrants and impact wide segments of the society, in most OECD countries, immigrants tend to spend more of their disposable income on rent and are less likely to own their homes. In the EU countries, for instance, one in five immigrants pay over 40% of their disposable income on rent, compared to roughly one in eight among the native-born (OECD/European Commission, 2023^[9]). Recent crises have deepened housing pressures, especially the demand for affordable housing.

Following Russia's full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine refugee flows often disproportionately impacted countries and communities with severe pre-existing housing issues. For example, Poland, the main host country, had already seen increases in rental prices of approximately 10% per year for several years prior to the refugee crisis (OECD, 2022^[14]).

Municipalities often play a direct role in determining housing policies and the situation has prompted them to explore ways in which to improve the housing situation of immigrants and refugees. Cities and local governments have been trying to expand reception capacities in their communities as needed but are also looking to address longer-term housing challenges for immigrants. The latter is often done through wider affordable housing programmes, but sometimes special dedicated funds are made available to improve housing for immigrants.

In Portland in the United States, the state of Maine and local city authorities have partnered to fund new affordable housing projects specifically for asylum seekers. In recent years, subnational authorities in the United States have been increasingly looking to work with private individuals, businesses, and the civil society to ease housing pressures. For instance, the Rent to Refugee Campaign was created to encourage landowners and property owners in Albuquerque to rent their available spaces to refugees. Across the OECD, the role of private households in housing provision increased significantly in response to the Ukrainian inflows (OECD, 2022^[14]).

Subnational authorities have been meanwhile also more vocal in calling for additional support from central government to address housing pressures, especially during periods of increased inflows. In the United States, cities like Chicago and New York City have called for federal financial aid to shelter migrants crossing the US-Mexico Border, and asked the US Government to speed up work authorisations to people seeking asylum in order to facilitate their transition to independent housing.

Central governments have sought to ease the strain on local accommodation capacities. As part of a recent Refugee Summit in Germany, the federal government, federal states and local governments agreed to the extension of a special rule in the German Building Code until 31 December 2027, which allows to bypass parts of the planning law for the construction of accommodation for refugees. Provisions were also made to ease municipalities' access to relevant funding, including allowing the use of urban development grants for building community and other relevant facilities, including for counselling services.

In other cases, central governments have tried to implement dispersal policies to address regional housing pressures. The housing-led dispersal policies, mainly for humanitarian migrants, are being used in about a third of OECD countries, including Denmark, Germany, New Zealand, Switzerland and the United States. Some countries, such as Australia, Canada and Korea, have incentives also in place for labour migrants to settle outside of segregated areas or urban centres. In recent years, OECD countries have also sought to expand their existing policies. In 2022, the central government in the United Kingdom announced that all local authorities in England, Scotland and Wales will be expected to be asylum dispersal areas moving forward (in contrast to less than half of all municipalities previously), allowing asylum seekers to be more easily moved to more cost-effective accommodation to mitigate regional pressures. Housing, however, should not be the only consideration as past research indicates that refugees resettled through dispersal policies that consider labour market conditions have significantly better earnings and less welfare dependency than those resettled based on available housing alone (OECD, 2016^[16]).

Co-operation between stakeholders is improving

While immigration policies are set at a national level, migrant integration policies are generally implemented at a local or regional level, turning effective co-ordination and resource flows between central and subnational administrations into a challenge. In recent years, however, there have been growing efforts to improve co-operation, communication, and partnership between the different parties. Several OECD countries, including Canada, Germany and New Zealand, have been undertaking consultations to further enhance engagement between central and subnational authorities as it relates to migration and integration systems. Australia, for instance, has established several collaborative forums, including the Ministerial Forum on Multicultural Affairs and the Senior Officials Settlement Outcomes Group (SOSOG), to advance inter-governmental co-operation by bringing together Commonwealth, state and territory and local governments to discuss a range of settlement and integration related issues.

Subnational governments are emerging as key partners not only in connection to integration, but are also increasingly influencing immigrant selection, especially in Australia and Canada. This will enhance co-operation and working relationships between central and regional authorities even further.

Significant efforts have been also made to improve the communication and consultation channels between subnational authorities themselves to share good practices, pool resources and act in a co-ordinated manner. Some of the different platforms that have been gaining momentum in recent years across the OECD include the Mayors Migration Council, the Global Mayoral Forum, and Eurocities network. In 2023, the first-ever Cities Summit of the Americas was held, bringing together mayors from the Western Hemisphere to share city-led solutions on a wide range of issues, including migration and integration. Alongside cities, other subnational stakeholders are also active in this sphere. The Office of New Americans (ONA) State Network brings together state officials from different US states to share good practices and to promote the labour market integration of migrants and refugees.

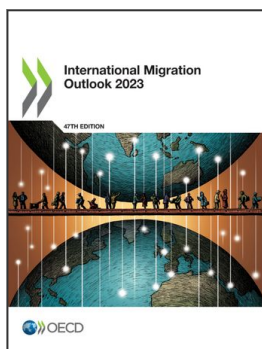
To ease funding flows and make them more suitable for local needs, subnational authorities are establishing their own financial instruments to support their work on integration. In 2021, the Mayors Migration Council launched the Global Cities Fund for Migrants and Refugees (GCF) to channel international funding directly to cities to implement inclusive programmes of their own design as they support migrants, refugees, and internally displaced people (IDPs). Some of the on-going projects funded through the instrument include supporting the work of the Opportunities Centre in Barranquilla, Colombia, to help Venezuelan and other migrants to access employment, expanding housing assistance provision to migrants in Medellin, and growing a municipal income protection programme to provide direct cash assistance for internally displaced persons in Mexico City.

Conclusion

The Ukrainian refugee crisis has further accelerated existing trends in integration policy in OECD countries, notably placing the integration of migrant women and the recognition of foreign qualifications at the forefront of policy responses. These trends had already been reinforced by the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the unprecedented labour shortages prevailing in virtually all OECD countries. In light of growing migration flows and the rising salience of migration issues, countries have also increasingly focused on civic integration, and especially on reforming access to citizenship, either towards relaxing or tightening access to naturalisation. Furthermore, the massive inflows of refugees from Ukraine have also put the issue of housing at the forefront, and with it the crucial question of co-ordination between local and national governments. Combatting discrimination is also gaining importance in migrant integration strategies, notably in Latin America where countries are stepping up efforts in that area in light of the recent high migration into countries with little prior exposure to immigration. Elsewhere in the OECD, this issue is also gaining new impetus, often in the context of anti-racism strategies.

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