The challenges of an action plan to improve the integration of aliens in Lithuania

Description

On 31st December 2014, the Ministry of Social Security and Labour of Lithuania approved an action plan for the development of integration policy for aliens (i.e. non-Lithuanians and stateless) for the period 2015-2017. The plan sets out three main goals: to integrate aliens into Lithuanian society; to increase tolerance towards aliens (including refugees) in Lithuanian society; and to improve cooperation between the various institutions involved in the integration of aliens.

As part of the EU effort to solve the refugee crisis, Lithuania agreed to accept 1,105 refugees from the Middle East and Africa during the period 2016-2017. In 2015, it granted the status of “subsidiary protection” only to 35 persons and the status of “refugee” only to one person.

A public opinion poll conducted in 2016 revealed that the attitudes of Lithuanians towards asylum seekers are split: 46% of respondents are completely against asylum seekers, 49% of respondents support their integration with some reservations, and only 5% of respondents support their integration without any reservations. Among those respondents who are ready to accept asylum seekers with some reservations, 70% claim that the accepted asylum seekers ought to be refugees (not economic migrants) and 70% claim that they should express their willingness to integrate into the society and to learn the national language. Among those respondents who are against asylum seekers, 44% put forward increasing economic problems (high support costs, growing competition for jobs) and 43% security issues (increasing threat of terrorism, higher level of crimes) (Civil Society Institute, 2016).

The data of a previous EU poll conducted a year before (Standard Eurobarometer survey, 2015) reveal that attitudes towards migration in Lithuania are influenced by both “macro” and “micro” level factors. Macro level factors include the dynamics of migration and the reasons for arrival of the migrants, as well as socio-economic aspects related to the unemployment rate in the country. With regard to the micro level factors, the respondent’s educational level appears to be the most significant one: respondents with a tertiary education tend to have a more favourable attitude. Finally, the data confirm that the mass media have a significant influence on the public’s perception of migration (Blažytė 2015).

The politicians competing for political power in the run-up to parliamentary elections (in October 2016) are adapting their discourse to the opinions of the electorate. In June 2016, the leaders of Lithuania’s ruling coalition parties (Social Democratic Party, Order and Justice Party and Labour Party) signed a political agreement voicing their disapproval of additional mandatory refugee resettlement quotas. The agreement states that if Lithuania is asked to take in an additional number of asylum seekers “under the mandatory principle”, the State must express “a strong, clear,
and unequivocal position” that such a relocation is “impossible”. The opposition parties did not react to this political agreement and did not take a clear position on the issue of integration of asylum seekers.

**Outlook & Commentary**

In May 2015, the Minister of Social Security and Labour allocated €434 thousand to projects promoting tolerance to be conducted as part of the National Programme of the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund 2014-2020 (Commission Decision C(2016) 1809). The implementation of these projects has not yet started.

Even though such allocations could be considered sufficient, according to Lithuanian standards, in order to better integrate aliens and increase their acceptance in the Lithuanian society incisive actions are needed.

Given that acceptance of aliens among vulnerable groups (people living on a low income, the unemployed, etc.) is lower than in the general population, the projects should be developed with professionals working with vulnerable groups (social workers, specialists from the Lithuanian Labour Exchange, representatives of social NGOs, etc.).

Experts claim that it is necessary to shift the media discourse, to explain the positive sides of migration. Often the integration of aliens is treated in too narrow a way, as a process of assimilation into the dominant culture of the country (Pilinkaitė Sotirovič, Žibas 2012).

**Further reading**


**Author**

Romas Lazutka, Arunas Poviliunas and Laima Zalimiene, Vilnius University

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