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The first year of implementation of the EU Action Plan on Integration: An evaluation of European policy coordination on migrant integration¹

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by Augusto Veloso Leão, Laura Westerveen & Ilke Adam

European migrant integration policy and the EU Action Plan on Integration

After a period of relatively little initiative on the topic of migrant integration at the EU level, in June 2016 the European Commission launched the 'EU Action Plan on Integration of third country nationals'. This Action Plan aims to set out a common policy framework for integration policies in the Member States, to support Member States' efforts in developing and strengthening their integration policies and to promote cooperation and policy coordination in the field of migrant integration. It includes actions across the different policy areas that are crucial for integration and describes the concrete measures the Commission will implement in this regard. The actions suggested by the Action Plan are divided across seven policy priorities, namely: pre-departure and pre-arrival measures; education; labour-market and vocational training; access to basic services; active participation and social inclusion; as well as tools for coordination, funding and monitoring of policies. While it targets all third country nationals in the EU, it also contains actions to address the specific challenges faced by refugees.

In its introduction, the Action Plan recognises the diversity of European societies and considers mobility as an inherent feature of Europe in the 21st century. It also acknowledges the fact that migrants from countries outside the EU have lower levels of education, employment and social inclusion and less access to housing². As one of its tools to support integration, the Action Plan stresses the need for coordination and cooperation at different levels of governance and with multiple stakeholders. In effect, integration policies are a competence reserved for

In June 2016, the European Commission launched the 'EU Action Plan on Integration of third country nationals'. The Action Plan provides a common policy framework for integration policies in the Member States and aims to promote cooperation and policy coordination in the field of migrant integration. Due to the multilevel and cross-sectoral character of migrant integration, policy coordination is crucial to an effective policy strategy in this area of policymaking. In this policy brief, we take the one year anniversary of the Action Plan as an occasion to evaluate the role of the European Commission in European policy coordination on migrant integration. We discuss the relevant European tools for policy coordination that have been put into place over the last decade and recommend an evaluation of the effect of these tools on the policy responses and outcomes in the Member States.

the EU Member States. While the EU institutions 'may establish measures to encourage and support actions by the Member States to promote the integration of third country nationals'³, direct harmonisation of national integration legislation and regulations is explicitly excluded from the EU's scope of action. Next to the provision of funding for projects in the realm of migrant integration, coordination is then the main tool the Commission has at its disposal to shape the Member States' integration policies.

Since the policy problem of integration – just like, for example, the problems of gender (in)equality and climate change – requires a multi-level and cross-sectoral approach in its implementation, coordination seems indeed crucial to an effective migrant integration strategy. This involves both vertical (between governance levels, i.e. local, regional, national and EU level) and horizontal coordination (across relevant departments, such as education, employment, housing and health), possibly also intersecting each other. In this policy brief, we want to use the one year anniversary of the Action Plan on integration as an occasion for evaluating the role of the European Commission in European policy coordination on migrant integration. To this purpose, we discuss the existing tools for policy coordination and provide recommendations for the extension and development of these tools.

Tools for European policy coordination on migrant integration

One year might not be enough to properly evaluate the impact of the EU Action Plan on Integration on national, regional and local migrant integration policies. Nonetheless, it is possible to review its potential as a tool for policy coordination within a wider framework of instruments and reflect upon the current implementation of some of the actions presented in the Action Plan⁴. The Action Plan can be considered the latest tool in a series of ‘soft instruments’ adopted by the Commission to promote cooperation and policy coordination between Member States in the field of migrant integration. It builds upon the Common Basic Principles for Immigrant Integration Policy in the EU from 2004 and the Common Agenda for Integration of 2005 (renewed in 2011). Moreover, it fits within the wider EU framework for immigrant integration policy including funding opportunities and EU platforms for discussing migrant integration. The Action Plan thus has a complementary function to these other tools, notably the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF, replacing the European Fund for the Integration of Third Country Nationals since 2014) and the new European Integration Network (launched in the Action Plan as an upgraded version of the earlier established network of National Contact Points on Integration).

To strengthen coordination between concerned actors, the Action Plan suggests that the integration of migrants should

be pursued at different levels (EU, national, regional and local) and by involving non-governmental stakeholders (civil society organisations, including diasporas and migrant communities, as well as faith-based organisations). Moreover, a second focus in the Action Plan is on the ‘mainstreaming’ of integration and inclusion across all relevant policy areas, particularly education and employment. Both vertical and horizontal coordination are thus stressed in the Action Plan. One of the main tools for promoting vertical coordination which can be found in the Action Plan is the European Integration Network. This is a network that gathers civil servants responsible for integration policies from different governance levels and agencies across the Member States. Regarding horizontal coordination, it must be noted that since November 2015, there exists interdepartmental cooperation on integration between the different relevant directorates within the European Commission, within the Inter-Service Group “Integration of third country nationals”. In addition, the Commission aims to financially support Member States’ efforts towards the mainstreaming of integration by proposing to the competent national authorities to also apply for EU funding outside the more specifically towards migration and integration oriented calls for funding, as provided by the AMIF. Member States can, for example, request funding for policy actions related to integration through the European Structural Investment programmes.

The existing tools for European policy coordination in the field of migrant integration mainly create a space for the exchange of good practices and for debating integration strategies between the Member States and, at the same time, provide incentives for Member States to develop actions that are in line with the EU’s conception of integration by offering different funding opportunities. However, such ‘soft’ tools are somewhat limited in the sense that there is always the possibility for Member States to primarily look for support for actions that are in line with their own conception of integration, while omitting those European initiatives that do not fit well with their policy preferences. An example of this situation is the rather limited focus of Member States on policy actions directed at the host society in the promotion of integration and anti-discrimination. The added value of the created European networks and the exchange of practices is also linked to the level of authority that the representatives of the Member States in these networks have in their respective governments. It must be noted here

that some Member States send high ranking officials, who have some decision-making power and can influence the proposed policy actions, to participate in the European Integration Network, whereas other representatives have less authority to influence the policy agenda.

Recommendations for improved European coordination on migrant integration

Throughout the last decade, different tools for promoting European coordination on migrant integration have come into existence at the EU level. However, little has been done so far to evaluate the effect that these 'soft' tools for policy coordination have on policy learning and the diffusion of policy responses in the realm of integration. Over ten years in development, it seems high time to evaluate how these tools function in practice. Reviewing whether the exchange of practices through the different available platforms also leads to concrete policy convergence throughout the different localities across the European Union, could be especially insightful. For example, it is the European Integration Network that seems to be the most important instrument for policy learning and exchange. Whereas the publication of the Action Plan entailed an upgrade of this network, no systematic evaluation of its functioning and concrete influence has yet taken place. Such an evaluation should not only focus on comparing Member States' policy responses, but also assess the extent to which different policies lead to different outcomes for the seven policy priorities of the Action Plan. Moreover, in terms of funding of integration initiatives under the AMIF, it would be interesting to assess the extent to which the policy priorities for integration as set out by the Commission – amongst which the promotion of policy coordination – are mirrored in the calls for funding and in the aims of the projects that are sponsored.

Next to evaluating the effect of the existing tools for coordination on Member States' integration policies, the Commission could invest more resources into the promotion of horizontal coordination. In addition to the interdepartmental cooperation within the Commission itself, best practices regarding horizontal coordination at national, regional and local levels could, for instance, be valorised through the existing platforms for exchange. For example, both the regions of Flanders and Catalonia (and formerly also the Netherlands)

and many of the German regional governments have installed an interdepartmental coordination commission on migrant integration. Another example could be the provision of funds for setting up such horizontal coordination fora through the AMIF.

Conclusions

To conclude, due to the cross-sectoral and multi-level nature of migrant integration as a policy problem, one of the main challenges in the implementation of the EU Action Plan on the integration of third country nationals is ensuring effective policy coordination between the different relevant policy fields, governance levels and the Member States. In the advancement of this issue, the Commission has put into place different tools for European policy coordination on migrant integration over the last decade. The most important of these tools seems to be the European Integration Network and the European Integration Fund (now part of the AMIF). Together they could provide a powerful instrument for promoting the inclusion of third country nationals in European societies. However, the effect that the European tools for policy coordination have on national, regional and local integration practices has not yet been assessed. Therefore, we suggest an evaluation of the functioning of these tools in practice and the concrete impact that they have on the policy actions and outcomes in the Member States. In addition, the EU's investment in the promotion of horizontal coordination could be upgraded. When the initiatives in the Action Plan related to policy coordination and exchange of good practices, such as the European Integration Network, strengthen their efforts towards horizontal coordination, they might better meet the needs of policymakers and create a space to coordinate policies between the various authorities responsible for integration in the European Union. The Commission could enjoy this opportunity to promote a more cohesive integration policy throughout the Union.

Footnotes

- 1 This policy brief is inspired by an event organised by the Institute for European Studies (IES-VUB) in collaboration with the VUB's Centre of Expertise on Gender and Diversity (Rhea) on March 22nd, 2017. The event discussed the implementation of the EU Action Plan on Integration. The speakers of the Policy Forum "The implementation of the EU Action Plan on Integration: Feedback from the member states, regional and local authorities" were: Valeria Setti, (European Commission, DG Home - Unit migrant integration), Ingrid Pelssers (Department of Equal Opportunities and Integration of the Flemish Home Affairs Agency), Martijn Kraaij (Directorate Society and Integration from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment of the Netherlands), Laura Westerveen (doctoral researcher IES-VUB), and Augusto Veloso Leão (visiting researcher from USP/Brazil to IES-VUB). We also received written contribution from David Cordonnier (Office of the Minister-President of the Brussels Region).
- 2 According to Eurostat data, presented in the Action Plan on Integration of Third Country Nationals, (COM(2016) 377 final), p.2.
- 3 TFEU, Article 79.4
- 4 A first effort towards the monitoring of the progress in the implementation of the actions suggested in the Action Plan has recently been made by the European Commission in the form of an online tool published on the European Website on Integration (see: <https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/main-menu/eus-work/actions>).

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