

Difficult Legacies, Risky Futures – The Baltic Perspective on Migration

Dealing with the mass immigration from Northern Africa and from the Middle East is one of the biggest challenges for the European Union. Whether Europe as a whole will be able to deal with this unprecedented influx of asylum seekers and migrants is to a large extent the most crucial question for European solidarity. It concerns not only the Union's capacity to control its external borders, but also the ability to share the burden in terms of allocation and integration of immigrants. Probably the second task is even more complicated. It touches upon the differences in migration policies and in popular perceptions, already existing among the member states. These differences tend to be latent in more favorable situations, but become clearly visible in critical moments. What is at stake in the context of the current Mediterranean migration crisis, is the European Union as an "all-weather" organization, which is capable to function not only in beneficial, but also in more difficult times.

In May 2015, when the European Commission proposed a mandatory allocation of migrant quotas for each of the member states, the Baltic countries – Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia – were among those member states who voiced the strongest opposition to such an idea. In July the consensus was reached among the member states on a significantly smaller amount of migrants, allocated according to "voluntary" quotas set by each country. The Baltic countries reluctantly agreed to share the common European burden and to accept a few hundreds of asylum-seekers and immigrants each. Although the Balts didn't refuse to receive a certain

amount of migrants on a voluntary basis (like Hungary did), the Baltic opposition to the Europe-wide distribution of Mediterranean migrants was quite fierce. Although a few high-standing Baltic politicians expressed their readiness to contribute to the solution of the crisis, many others strictly denied any Baltic responsibility and participation in the burden-sharing. This made some Western commentators to treat this Baltic attitude as outrageous, especially, taking into account how dependent Baltic countries are from the solidarity of other European nations – both in economic and security terms.

A certain level of skepticism towards the Baltic understanding of European solidarity might be fully legitimate. Nevertheless, before denouncing the Baltic attitudes as profoundly un-European, it is necessary to understand the background of these attitudes. The Baltic skepticism towards migration has much deeper roots than just a situational calculation of costs and benefits. They are mainly rooted in the country's history and popular perceptions. These perceptions are often used and misused by politicians in order to boost the popular support and their own approval ratings. Therefore, in order to understand the Baltic attitudes towards migration it is necessary to consider the historical aspects, as well as the popular opinion and the attitudes of political elites. All factors mentioned here are not meant to provide an excuse for the lack of European solidarity. On the contrary, they help to explain the obstacles, experienced by the process of European integration, and possibly provide ways to overcome them.

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V.

LETTLAND

DR. IVARS IJABS

September 2015

www.kas.de/lettland

The Baltic States and Migration: History not Yet Past

First of all, during the last twenty five years after the restoration of independence, the Baltic countries have been subjected to significant levels of emigration. All three countries have lost significant parts of their populations, which is to a large extent due to the emigration. It especially concerns the period after the economic crisis of 2008/2009, when Baltic countries, especially Latvia and Lithuania, were suffering from high levels of unemployment and social insecurity. In years 1990 till 2014, the population of Estonia shrunk from 1 550 000 to 1 350 000, that of Latvia – from 2 500 000 to 2 000 000, of Lithuania – from 3 700 000 to 3 300 000. Taking into account the relatively small size of the Baltic populations, these levels of emigration are often perceived as a threat to the future development of the country, as well as to the cultural identity of Latvians, Estonians, and Lithuanians. Significant immigration, on the contrary, is something quite new for the Baltic States after the restoration of independence. Ever since 1991 the Baltic countries have had some levels of immigration. During the last years it has risen to a yearly rate of a few thousands of non-EU country nationals being received in each of the three countries. Nevertheless, the issue has been scarcely discussed in the political debate, and the immigration has remained to a large extent under the radar screen of the Baltic public opinion. Therefore, contrary to most of the Western European member states, in the Baltic countries the proposal to shelter a significant amount of immigrants comes as a surprise. In particular, it is met with negative feelings by those Baltic citizens, who feel insecure about their linguistic and cultural identities in countries subjected to significant emigration.

Secondly, the traumatic experience of the Soviet period still plays a significant role. Contrary to the Central European countries, like Czech Republic, Poland, or Hungary, the Baltic States experienced significant ethno-demographic changes during the Soviet rule. It especially concerns Estonia and Latvia, which were subjected to mass immigra-

tion of Soviet citizens from other parts of the USSR, mainly Russia, Ukraine, and Belorussia. It changed the ethnic and linguistic composition of the Baltic countries, whereby ethnic Latvians and Estonians often felt themselves threatened by the mass influx of immigrants with weak or no links with the Baltic languages and cultures. After the restoration of independence significant attempts have been made to “reverse” this Soviet policy, both in linguistic-cultural policies and in political participation. The success of these reversals has sometimes been rather limited, whereby significant proportion of the Soviet-era immigrants is still weakly integrated in the Baltic societies. For this reason, the Baltic countries have been rather wary about increased levels of “diversity”, both in terms of popular attitudes and the policy-making.

These findings are confirmed by the recent Eurobarometer opinion polls. Although the Baltic citizens do not see the immigration as a particularly important problem for their countries, their attitudes toward it are mainly negative. Immigration of people from outside of the EU evokes negative feelings to 78 per cent of Latvians, to 73 per cent of Estonians, and to 70 per cent of Lithuanians. These are among the highest disapproval levels in the EU, comparable with countries directly affected by the current immigration crisis, like Italy, Hungary (70 per cent), and Cyprus (72 per cent). At the same time, the Baltics are much more positive towards the immigration from other EU countries – 58 per cent of Estonians and Lithuanians, as well as 36 per cent of Latvians would support it.

In democratic countries, attitudes towards migration both mirror and influence the country’s migration policy. This is the case also regarding the Baltic attitude towards the Mediterranean crisis. Largely due to external pressure, the Baltic governments have taken a pragmatic stance towards the issue and agreed to take a limited amount of asylum seekers. However, quite visible and prominent Baltic politicians have recently made statements that seriously put in doubt the Baltic commitment to the European solidarity and sometimes even bor-

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V.

LETTLAND

DR. IVARS IJABS

September 2015

www.kas.de/lettland

der on racism. Perhaps, the most prominent politician who expressed her negative view on the issue, was the Lithuanian president, Dalia Grybauskaitė, who commented during the June EU Summit that „that she had no intention of contributing to any solution“ of the migrant problem. The former liberal foreign minister of Estonia Kristiina Ojuland commented that African immigrants “a threat to the white race”, which cannot be admitted to Europe. However, the event that got most international acknowledgment was the anti-immigration demonstration organized by the Latvian far-right “National alliance”, which is a part of the government of that country. Posters like “No to the Genocide of White Peoples”, “Down with the cosmopolitan liberalization!” and “We are ready to welcome Swedish refugees when they will run away from immigrants’ demolished Stockholm!” were used.

The Baltic Integration Capacity

As stated before, the migration policy has not been among priorities of the Baltic governments, mainly due to the relatively low levels of immigration. Since it may change in the nearest future, it is necessary to evaluate briefly the readiness of the Baltic countries to integrate an increasing amount of migrants. In most countries, however, the migrant integration policies have developed continuously, with new challenges emerging. Also in the Baltic countries the integration policy will most probably evolve and develop itself, when new migration flows will be coming to the country.

Baltic policies of the migrant integration are put into comparative perspective in the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX), which covers in detail integration policies of 38 countries, mostly in the developed world. MIPEX deals with multiple indicators of migrant integration – from mobility of the labor market and health services to the access to citizenship and political participation. The Baltic countries do not occupy highest places in the ranking. In 2014, Estonia was ranked 22, Lithuania 34, and Latvia 37, which makes the Latvian integration policy the worst among all EU member states. With a possible exception of Estonia,

these results suggest that the Baltic integration policies are not well suited to the challenge of immigration. Of course, not all MIPEX indicators can be regarded as a policy issue. E.g., the poor access to the health system and to the specialized education is very much connected with the limited financial resources of the Baltic countries, especially, in the aftermath of the economic crisis of 2008-2009. Nevertheless, these indicators show the relative strengths and weaknesses of the Baltic integration policies that should be taken into account, when expecting new waves of immigration in the nearest future.

First of all, there are some undoubtable strengths, which might make the Baltics attractive for certain groups of future immigrants. There are relatively high levels of labor market mobility in the Baltics: immigrants are free to choose their employer, to change the employment; setting up one’s own business is also possible. Significant amount of non-EU immigrants are employed in all three Baltic countries, esp., in Latvia, when compared with other EU countries. Also the family reunion is not too complicated, although there is a time limit, and in Estonia and Latvia long-term partnerships and same-sex couples are not eligible for family reunion. It is relatively easy to apply for long-term residence permits in all three countries – despite relatively high (B2) language requirements in Estonia and Latvia, as well as income requirements in Latvia. Most of the non-EU immigrants (including Latvian and Estonian non-citizens) reside in the Baltic countries permanently, and enjoy most civic and social rights on an equal level with the Baltic citizens.

If the labor market, family reunion, and acquisition of permanent residence can be regarded as relative strengths of the Baltic integration policies, the access to education and health systems, as well as political participation are obvious weaknesses. As in most Central Eastern European countries, the health systems are relatively poorly developed, and it affects not only the immigrants, but also the citizens. However, in all three Baltic countries certain groups of immigrants get even fewer entitlements than

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V.

LETTLAND

DR. IVARS IJABS

September 2015

www.kas.de/lettland

in most Central European countries. Some migrant groups, like refugees and asylum-seekers, usually get some coverage; others, like undocumented migrants and temporary residents, receive no state-funded medical services. The information on available health services in other languages tends to be poor, and there is very little awareness of culturally sensitive health issues among medical personnel.

In education, only Estonia has succeeded in providing the immigrant pupils with equal access to education. The state provides free Estonian language courses, and assists the teachers to improve their teaching skills for a multicultural environment. In Latvia and Lithuania, in contrast, mostly ad hoc measures have been taken; the state language instruction is available only on the project basis, mostly with international funding. There is very little targeted support for immigrants, which might lead to lower learning results and higher dropout rates among immigrants. However, one should also take into account, that until now very few (approx. 1 per cent) pupils in the Baltic schools have been first generation immigrants. With increasing immigration, the challenge of integration will become much more pressing for the Baltic educational systems.

In terms of political participation of non-EU immigrants, the Baltic countries seem to be more exclusive than most EU countries – albeit on different levels. In all three countries, non-EU immigrants' rights to form political parties are restricted. In Latvia, long-term non-EU immigrants can vote neither in national, nor in local elections; in Estonia, they can vote in local elections, but cannot be elected. In Lithuania and Estonia, there are consultative bodies serving as a link between immigrant communities and the state; in Latvia, there is no such an institution. At the same time, Estonia and Latvia are the countries with the highest proportion of long-term residents without citizenship among the EU countries: around 15 and 17 per cent of permanent residents have no Estonian and Latvian citizenship.

Conclusion

Migration is an extremely complex issue, and in each European member state's approach to it reflects the country's history, economic profile, and cultural features. The Baltic countries are no exception in this. Dramatic turns of the 20th century history, several foreign occupations, as well as unbalanced socioeconomic development after the restoration of independence in 1990 have all made deep impact on the Baltic approaches to migration. However, the understanding of the past developments cannot substitute for planning for the future, and the future of the Baltic States lies in the ever closer European integration. Also the immigration policy will be developed according to the principles of European solidarity, and Latvian, Lithuanian, and Estonian decisions to accept several hundreds of Mediterranean asylum-seekers are only first steps in this direction. Moreover, it also necessary to keep in mind that assistance and knowledge-sharing by other European countries, which have more experience in the integration of migrants, can be of crucial importance here. The power of European solidarity lies not only in the centralized regulation, but, first and foremost, in mutual assistance in the achievement of common goals.