

# Conference proceedings



## High-Level Policy Forum on "The integration of newcomers by EU member states"

Informal meeting

8 February 2024

Conference Centre Lamot - Mechelen, Belgium

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The Agency for Home Affairs of the Government of Flanders invited ministers, policymakers, and experts from across the EU and beyond to the High-Level Policy Forum and Ministerial Conference on “The Integration of Newcomers by EU Member States” on February 8 and 9, 2024, in Mechelen, organised within the framework of the Belgian Presidency of the council of the EU.

Ensuring the integration of newcomers into an increasingly diverse European society is a pressing issue on the societal agenda of each of the 27 EU member states and their regions. Across Europe and other parts of the world, states and regions demonstrate how it can be done. This gathering was an opportunity to collect all these insights, exchange best practices, and determine the priorities for future policy agendas.



The Forum on 8 February welcomed a diverse audience, ranging from ministers and heads of delegations to policymakers, experts, and other stakeholders. The day included:

- Keynote speeches by the Flemish Minister of Home Affairs, Civic Integration, and Equal Opportunities, as well as representatives from the European Commission.
- Auditorium sessions on the future of integration, the role of host societies, and labour market integration, featuring ministers and policymakers.
- Parallel sessions with workshops and training on various related subjects, such as language acquisition, social orientation, buddy and networking initiatives, communication strategies, and crisis management.
- Site visits in Mechelen, offering a chance to delve further into inspiring local translations of the Flemish integration trajectory.

The Ministerial Conference on 9 February was exclusively for ministers and heads of delegation representing states and regions in Europe and beyond, alongside high officials from international institution.

# THE INTEGRATION OF NEWCOMERS BY EU MEMBER STATES

high-level policy forum

8 February 2024

Mechelen, Belgium



	CENTRAL HALL	AUDITORIUM AUDITORIUM SESSIONS	DIJLEZAAL PARALLEL SESSIONS	HERTEN AAS PARALLEL SESSIONS	BEGIJNENZOLDER PARALLEL SESSIONS	VISIT SITE VISIT IN MECHELEN	VISIT SITE VISIT IN MECHELEN	CENTRAL HALL
8:00								
9:00								
9:00		Registration 08:15 - 09:00						
10:00		Welcome and keynote speeches 09:00 - 10:15						
11:00	The integration trajectory in Flanders 10:15 - 12:00	Integration of newcomers in 2030: challenges, successes and future priorities 10:15 - 12:00	Second language acquisition of adults: from theory to practice 10:15 - 12:00	Inspiring approaches to labour market integration 10:15 - 12:00	Communicating policies and results to a broader public 10:15 - 12:00	Welcome to Mechelen: Explore the city with a local buddy and newcomer duo 10:15 - 12:00	Language practice boat tour 10:15 - 12:00	
12:00								Lunch 12:00 - 13:00
13:00	The integration trajectory in Flanders 13:00 - 14:45	Role of host societies in integration 13:00 - 14:45	Psychosocial well-being of newcomers 13:00 - 14:45	Integration in times of crisis 13:00 - 14:45		Preparing newcomers for the labour market 13:00 - 17:00	Language practice boat tour 13:00 - 14:45	
14:00								
15:00								Coffee break 14:45 - 15:15
16:00	The integration trajectory in Flanders 15:15 - 17:00	Labour market integration 15:15 - 17:00	New digital tools and instruments in the integration process 15:15 - 17:00	Social participation as a stimulus for networking and language learning 15:15 - 17:00				
17:00		Closing speech 17:00 - 17:20						Reception 17:20 - 18:00



## 1. Auditorium sessions

The conference commenced with addresses from three distinguished speakers. **Jeroen Windey**, Administrator-General of the Agency for Home Affairs of the Government of Flanders, opened the conference, briefly presenting recent policy developments in Flanders in the areas of civic integration and living together policies. **Gwendolyn Rutten**, Vice-Minister-President of the Government of Flanders and Flemish Minister for Home Affairs, Public Governance, Civic Integration and Equal Opportunities, proceeded by charting the current migration and integration landscape in Flanders and Europe. **Michael Shotter**, Deputy Director-General in charge of Horizontal Affairs and Migration in DG HOME of the European Commission, concluded the opening session with a substantive address on migration management and the EU's forthcoming asylum and migration reform framework.

The following sections of this document include detailed reports on panel discussions, in-depth sessions, and workshops organised throughout the conference. We want to thank everyone who contributed their knowledge and expertise to this event and look forward to future joint venture.



## *Integration of newcomers in 2030: challenges, successes and future priorities*

Ministers and high-level officials representing states, regions and international institutions in and outside the EU discussed the main building blocks of resilient policies for successful integration of newcomers in host societies.

**Meghan Benton**, Director of the International Programme at Migration Policy Institute, opened the first auditorium session with a setting-the scene speech and continued to moderate the panel discussion. The panel brought together **Kaare Dybvad Bek**, Minister for Migration and Integration of Denmark; **Martin Kienl**, Director-General for Integration at the Office of Religious Affairs and Ethnic Groups of the Federal Chancellery of Austria; **Michael Shotter**, Director for Migration and Asylum of DG Home Affairs and Migration of the European Commission; **Bart Somers**, Mayor of Mechelen and until November 2023 Flemish Minister Vice-Minister-President and Minister of Home Affairs, Civic Integration, and Equal Opportunity; and **Fabrizio Rossi**, Secretary-General of the Council of European Municipalities and Regions. Below are the key takeaways of these discussions.

**Integration has to happen on the local level.** Michael Shotter spoke about the **principle of subsidiarity**. Only so much can be accomplished on a higher level – achieving success within the EU hinges on effective implementation at the local level, transcending top-down directives. The EU faces a hurdle in this regard, given that its primary interlocutors are based in Brussels while actual implementation and execution takes place within member states and especially on the local level. The EU should broaden its scope and open up funding streams with this perspective in mind. However, this endeavour is met with challenges, as such efforts require a nuanced understanding of local political dynamics and sensitivities. The EU aims to encourage best practices and knowledge sharing across its member states. Minister Dybvad Bek underlined this commitment and shares the idea that **measures at the municipal level are highly effective and crucial for successful and sustainable strategies**.

Bart Somers emphasised the crucial role of empowering local actors, underlining the **importance of local actions like the participation and network project**. This initiative not only provides informal information and networking opportunities, but also fosters a sense of belonging within society. Newcomers can effectively integrate into society through engagement in activities such as joining sports or youth clubs, facilitated by intermediaries.



Such interactions are best facilitated at the local level. Fabrizio Rossi echoed these sentiments, advocating for greater autonomy of local actors in driving projects, citing their **intimate understanding of day-to-day challenges**. He emphasised the **necessity of adequate funding and support mechanisms to inspire innovative endeavours at this level**.

**Connecting people to the labour market needs to happen as soon as possible.** Martin Kienl outlined Austria's updated integration system, which prioritises **connecting individuals directly with companies to facilitate their entry into the labour market while concurrently fostering language acquisition**. This shift was prompted by a decline in educational scores, with only 12% reaching proficiency at the A2 level in German. Bart Somers agreed, emphasising the importance of avoiding putting people in a waiting room. Encouraging newcomers to engage in employment while learning the language concurrently **prevents a passive mindset, which can be significantly harder to motivate and activate**.

**Integration policies require strategic planning and a comprehensive approach.** Michael Shotter stressed the necessity of a comprehensive approach to migration management, highlighting the shift from ad hoc integration measures to a strategic framework, working towards system stability. The EU's forthcoming asylum and migration reform framework signifies this strategic shift, aiming for a well-prepared system implementation within two years. Shotter also underlined the importance of a preventive approach beyond EU borders, particularly for secondary movements, advocating for a unified strategy. Meghan Benton echoed this need for strategic planning, urging a departure from reactive policies dictated by crises in favour of a more proactive approach.

**There is a third step that follows immigration and integration: inclusion.** Fabrizio Rossi identified a crucial additional stage, *inclusion*, emphasising the ongoing need to cultivate a sense of belonging through resource-intensive daily efforts. Bart Somers emphasised the progression beyond immigration and integration to fostering a shared community ethos of



*living together*. He advocated for transcending divisive narratives of us versus them and instead promoting a unified sense of belonging. Minister Dybvad Bek noted Denmark's success in labour market integration but acknowledged challenges in social integration. Michael Shotter highlighted existing EU funding for integration and proposed expanding future initiatives, including 'cohesion' funding, to further enhance social cohesion efforts at the EU level.

## *The role of host societies*

Ministers and high-level officials representing states, regions, and international institutions in and outside the EU showcase innovative policies fostering inclusion, upholding national norms and values, and recognising the pivotal role of an actively engaged host society, including participation and networking initiatives.

The session was organised as a panel discussion, opened by a setting-the-scene speech by **Ola Henrikson**, Regional Director for EEA, EU and NATO at IOM. This was followed by two panel discussions. The first one was joined by **Tània Verge**, Minister of Equality and Feminism of Catalunya (Spain); **André Sobczak**, Secretary-General of Eurocities; and **Mike Connolly**, Deputy-Director Operations Homes for Ukraine Scheme of Wales (United Kingdom). The second panel consisted of **Baroness Joanna Penn**, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing and Communities of the United Kingdom; **Kjetil Vevle**, Norway's Secretary of State for Integration at the Ministry of Labour and Social Inclusion; **Nerea Melgosa**, Minister of Equality, Justice and Social Policies in the Basque Country (Spain); and **Eda Silberg**, Undersecretary for Cultural Diversity in the Ministry of Culture of Estonia. Below are the key takeaways of these discussions.

**Ola Henrikson**, Regional Director for EEA, EU and NATO at IOM (International Organisation for Migration), opened the session on the role of host societies. He stated that integration is a **continuous, long-term, and two-way process** requiring efforts from both migrants and host societies. He highlighted that **at the local level, a sense of belonging is more likely to emerge**, facilitating smoother integration. He hereby noted the crucial role of regions, some of which were represented in the following panels.



Focusing on **combating structural racism and xenophobia**, Regional Minister for Catalunya, **Tania Verge**, highlighted that integration policies must address the receiving societies. She emphasised that antiracism must be a key component of any integration strategy. Verge pointed out the contradiction between social and economic empowerment efforts and the prevalence of institutional racism, stressing the serious impact on migrant health. She also discussed the need for policies that integrate undocumented migrants into the workforce. In this regard, Verge noted the region's struggle with addressing language barriers, and explained that such challenges necessitate initiatives to link language learning with practical activities such as school and work.

Secretary General of Eurocities, **André Sobczak**, underlined the importance of attention to **multilevel governance** in integration, highlighting that regions and local levels are key in developing effective policies. He noted that cities, in particular, play a pivotal role in integration efforts, collaborating well with regional governments. According to Sobczak, integration begins in cities, which face numerous challenges, notably access to funding, but also offer significant opportunities. Discussing the agenda of Eurocities for the upcoming European elections, Sobczak underscored the **need for financial support and long-term sustainable funding**. He argued that cities should have a seat at the decision-making table to better address their unique needs and perspectives. He also stressed the importance of a **long-term vision for cities**, essential for building infrastructure such as schools and healthcare facilities.



**Michael Connolly**, Deputy-Director Operations Homes for Ukraine Scheme of Wales, outlined the Welsh '**Nation of Sanctuary**' vision on integration, based on a **principle-driven approach**. While Wales does not have control over borders or immigration policies as these rest with the United Kingdom Government, it does have responsibilities for many aspects of life including housing, education, healthcare, community cohesion and more. He emphasised the importance of partnerships between the UK and Welsh governments and local communities. Key principles included the necessity of providing access to healthcare, employment opportunities, and language training, noting that migrants have **much to offer both culturally and in the labour market**. Integration efforts should begin from the day migrants arrive, focusing on language training and the introduction of norms and values. Connolly stressed the importance of a long-term vision, particularly recognising the **unique obstacles faced by different cities, whether large or small**. He noted that different cohorts of newcomers can create cumulative pressure on cities, using the example of balancing social housing needs for locals versus newcomers.

Echoing the call for attention to combat racism and xenophobia in the second panel discussion of this session, **Kjetil Vevle**, Secretary of State for Integration of Norway, discussed the country's **new action plan against racism and discrimination**. Revealing some of the principles of the plan, which was developed based on input from various ministries,



but also civil society, Vevle emphasised the importance for newcomers to adapt to new societies while recognising that **integration is a two-way process**. Vevle highlighted the challenges of **racism and discrimination as real barriers to integration and social cohesion**, stressing the need for structural measures to counter these issues. The action plan places a particular focus on addressing these problems within the labour market, especially for youth.

Undersecretary for Cultural Diversity in the Estonian Ministry of Culture, **Eda Silberg**, highlighted that despite being a small country, Estonia is very multicultural. She stressed the importance of raising awareness about the country's diversity and ensuring that both migrants and citizens **understand and appreciate this multiculturalism**. Key initiatives include language training and orientation courses, though the latter are still being developed in terms of communicating norms and values, and ensuring these are understood. Referring to a **recent survey on successful integration**, Silberg pointed out three critical factors. First, a society without violence is paramount. Second, there must be a unified contribution towards society, particularly in terms of labour participation. Finally, mutual trust between migrants and the host society is essential for successful integration.

**Nerea Melgosa**, Minister of Equality, Justice and Social Policies in the Basque Country, highlighted the **distinction between inclusion, which involves aspects like language acquisition, and integration, which also involves understanding the position and perspectives of newcomers**. While integration involves understanding and adapting to the broader society, inclusion focuses on giving a voice to individuals and actively involving them in decision-making processes. She stressed the importance of respect, solidarity, and tolerance in fostering a cohesive society. Efforts in municipalities were noted, with regional and local programmes and tools to effectively work with migrants. Melgosa emphasised the significance of shared values and a human-centred approach. Furthermore, the discussion delved into the difference between integration and inclusion.



Baroness Joanna Penn, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing and Communities of the United Kingdom, shared that **integration should not be confused with assimilation**, and requires active participation from all members of society. Understanding why **outcomes vary among different groups is crucial**, as experiences vary depending on individuals' backgrounds and origins. Efforts are being made to **collect and analyse data** to understand these outcomes, and to make services more accessible and tailored to meet diverse needs of a diverse population. Furthermore, she underscored the understanding of norms and values as central to integration, though noting that it can be challenging to address and teach effectively. The government aims to increase reporting on hate crimes, recognising the importance of addressing such issues in fostering social cohesion.

## ***Labour market integration***

Ministers and high-level officials representing states, regions and international institutions in and outside the EU share policies and strategies for labour market integration. Emphasis is placed on expediting labour market accessibility, meaningfully considering language acquisition and skills development, and effectively engaging employers and other key stakeholders.

This session was introduced by a setting-the-scene speech by Swedish Minister for Employment and Integration, **Johan Pehrson**. The discussion then took place in two panel discussions. The first one included **Sofia Voultepsi**, Deputy Minister of Migration and Asylum, in charge of Integration, of Greece; **Antje Grotheer**, Member and Rapporteur for CIVEX (Commission for Citizenship, Governance, Institutional and External Affairs) for the European Committee of the Regions; and **Thomas Liebig**, Senior Migration Specialist in the International Migration Division at OECD. The second panel consisted of **Catherine Scott**, Assistant Deputy Minister of Settlement, Integration and Francophone Affairs of Canada; **Wolfgang Hattmannsdorfer**, State Councillor for Social Affairs and Youth of Upper Austria (Austria); and **Andriana Sukova**, Acting Director-General of DG Employment, Social Affairs, and Inclusion of the European Commission.

**Minister Pehrson** emphasised that with twenty per cent of Sweden's population born outside the country, integration into the labour market is a top priority. Sweden faces **significant employment and education gaps among migrants**, among the largest in Europe. Key strategies to address these challenges include: implementing a higher requirement of Swedish language proficiency within a set timeframe, with a language requirement for citizenship; enhancing vocational training programs to facilitate job readiness; and strengthening incentives for women to work, making financial self-support through employment more beneficial than relying on benefits. Everyone who can work, should do so. Furthermore, the Minister stresses his attention to high school education support for youngsters, as well as his attention to safety concerns in currently violence-prone segregated areas (e.g. investing in public safety through collaboration with private companies), as both policy matters likewise **affect the integration of newcomers into the workforce and society as a whole**.

Bringing in the Greek perspective, **Deputy Minister Voultepsi** likewise shared some of the country's main focal points and strategies for labour market integration. A thorough assessment of refugees' educational and professional backgrounds is crucial for matching them with suitable job opportunities, **addressing labour shortages in various sectors**, such as agriculture, construction, and tourism. To facilitate smooth integration, avoid social issues while at the same time convincing migrants to stay in Greece and not progress to other countries, **adequate housing must be provided**. Safe and stable housing helps prevent violence and marginalisation, while social orientation programmes help refugees understand local customs, legal systems, and available services, fostering a sense of community. **Special attention should be given to unaccompanied minors and their education**. At first, these youngsters were sent to regular schools, however this did not pass well. By establishing educational programmes *in* refugee camps, with an intensive focus on learning Greek, not only benefits them academically and socially, but indirectly encourages their parents or guardians to participate in the labour market, knowing their children are receiving proper education and care.

Focusing on the experience of Ukrainian refugees in Europe, **Antje Grotheer** from the European Committee of the Regions stressed the importance of **immediate work opportunities**. Refugees should work as soon as possible, as it is the best way to integrate and learn the local language, while addressing the general need for (skilled) workers. Grotheer discussed a good practice in the **partnership with organisations like the Red Cross** to provide vocational training and facilitate inclusion in the labour market. Red Cross workers reached out to both refugees and potential employers, whereby the latter are supported to accommodate, train, and retain migrant workers. Once they join a company, they learn the language (in this case German) and receive vocational training. When a partner, like the Red Cross, can do the work of actually matching refugees and employers, there is **much more trust by both parties** to give those work opportunities a fair shot. Recognising the **diverse situations across EU member states**, and the consequent challenge to convince all of a single strategy for labour market integration of refugees, Grotheer underlined the universal importance of societal peace and equal opportunities for migrants and locals. In this regard, there should be attention to problems of locals in the welcoming societies and public opinion. Solutions to the welcoming society's grievances are an ambitious yet challenging part of addressing refugees' experience.

Senior migration specialist of the OECD **Thomas Liebig** built further on these points, highlighting the critical point of **basic skills investment**. Countries and regions should invest more in the basic skills of low skilled people that arrive, as some are notably lacking. Additionally, he noted how, once such basic competencies are enhanced, performance in other aspects of integration processes seem to perform better as well: language learning, vocational training, children education, etc. As for the development of **high skilled workers**, they should receive intensive language training and vocational training; these can entail extensive organisation and require costly investments, but do pay off in the long run, especially when we want to develop a more sustainable labour market. **Investing in migrants is investing in our societies**. For instance, numbers reveal a fairly high employment rate for Ukrainian refugees in a number of European countries, however these are often in low quality jobs. The efforts should not stop once people are active in the labour market; we must invest in vocational training. Lastly, he brought in a **gender gap focus**: employment gaps must be addressed, with attention to mothers, particularly women with small children. If a state does not invest sufficient resources in basic skills, employment rates among children of migrants drop significantly.

Assistant Deputy Minister of Settlement, Integration and Francophone Affairs, **Catherine Scott**, outlined Canada's proactive stance on immigration. Canada has been promoting **economic immigration to meet critical labour shortages** in sectors like technology, nursing, and agriculture. About sixty per cent of Canada's immigration numbers are for economic reasons, with a growing number of temporary labour. Nonetheless, a large focus is also put on support for asylum seekers. Through innovative programmes that encompass mentoring towards jobs, job placement services, and childcare, they develop a **supportive framework to help asylum seekers to navigate the labour market**. Special attention is awarded to women and mothers, for instance through four pilot projects which particularly





delved into mentoring (guidance, building confidence) while providing necessary support (e.g. childcare facilities to allow more time and space for language training). Some challenges remain, such as housing (infrastructure cannot keep up) and **social inclusion and cohesion**. For the latter, Canada considers it a two-way approach: both newcomers and the welcoming society are actively involved in this, which is why all levels (federal state, regions, municipalities, employers, communities etc.) have responsibilities.

Regional Minister for Upper Austria, **Wolfgang Hattmannsdorfer**, highlighted Austria's need for **a common vision on migration**, noting that this has for a long time been lacking. Furthermore, he advocated for a more straightforward European strategy, supported by EU funds, as the development of employment programmes for migrants should be a **top priority on the EU agenda**. He noted how the absence of such a common European approach and strategy on migrant integration translates into feelings of isolation, and the image that the European Union is not listening. Another challenge mentioned was the issue of illiteracy. High number of refugees are illiterate, leaving both teachers and students in language courses quite frustrated. Language acquisition should be a top priority, and should receive continued attention even when people have obtained employment. The Regional Minister argued that for this exact reason, acquiring colloquial levels of German should be a requirement for receiving social benefits. Regarding efforts to meet labour market shortages, Upper Austria has, for instance, an MoU with the Philippines to recruit nurses. **Regional partnerships thus can be leveraged to benefit local economies**.

**Andriana Sukova**, Acting Director-General of DG Employment, Social Affairs, and Inclusion of the European Commission, emphasised the importance of **partnerships** in enhancing integration efforts, highlighting that everyone should take part in the process. Addressing the **gender gap in employment**, she stressed the need for extra support for women with children. This includes the recognition of their qualifications and providing job guidance to ensure they can successfully enter the labour market. Sukova also focused on the



necessity of **protecting migrants from exploitation** and informal work abuses, ensuring that they have access to their full rights. Furthermore, she pointed out the collaboration between the EU and Northern African countries to train potential migrants in their home countries before they arrive in Europe. This proactive approach aims to equip migrants with the skills needed for smoother integration into European societies.

## 2. Parallel sessions

### *Second language acquisition of adults: from theory to practice*

In this session on second language acquisition (SLA) of adults focused on three pillars: empirical research on SLA, putting such knowledge into practice, and identifying what remains to be explored further. This session was hosted by **Amal** (Agency for integration and civic Integration in the city of Ghent, Belgium) in collaboration with the **CTO, Centrum voor Taal en Onderwijs** (*Centre for Language and Education*), a multidisciplinary centre of expertise for language, education and society from KU Leuven (*Catholic University of Leuven*). **Mariet Schiepers**, director of the CTO, and colleagues provide the latest insights into SLA and the necessary literacy skills in adults according to research. The main belief is that language should be a driving force for equal learning opportunities for all, life-long.

How does one learn a first, second, third... language, and what does SLA-research say about it? Language acquisition is a complex interplay of sufficiently rich and meaningful language provision, of many opportunities to speak the language oneself by interacting and receiving feedback in the process, and of implicit learning and explicit instruction. Schiepers explained the building blocks/key elements of language didactics: **positive language attitude; context-rich; functional; interactive; making explicit; support; and reflection.**

Existing research points to the importance of a cross-policy approach in which partnerships are crucial to create and stimulate formal, non-formal and informal learning opportunities in different spheres of life. How can we build bridges between learning spheres and join forces with other actors to achieve even more powerful language learning opportunities?

CTO advises to bridge, firstly, between **implicit language learning/learning by doing** with **explicit language learning** for powerful language learning. Secondly, between **linguistic goals** with **subject goals** and **broader literacy skills** (= digital skills and numeracy) and **key competencies** (= self-regulation, learning to learn) for an integrated, needs-based, functional and context-rich approach. Thirdly, between **learning inside school** with **learning in the living environment outside school** for extra practice/interaction opportunities (input and output) and to facilitate the transfer of what is learnt. **This is a plea to tear down the walls of the language classroom.** Furthermore, we should join forces, with **subject teachers, volunteers, IT-specialists...** for setting up functional and needs-based approaches but also for setting up **learning networks of professionals and volunteers** where expertise and materials can be exchanged; but also with **community or workplace partners** for setting up **regional learning ecosystems and literacy networks** in which all learners are reached with an accessible and target-group specific offer. Teachers need this professional support. **This is a plea for a needs-based and functional approach.**

The session proceeded with practical examples which embed language learning within one or more spheres of life, such as the workplace, spare time activities, and school. When teaching/learning a language, these needs should be the starting point. In this vein, **language acquisition is not an end goal but rather a tool to meet the needs.** This reveals that the call for a needs-based functional approach which does not solely take place in classrooms is often not put into practice. We are missing some insights. For instance, only a small fraction of current research concerns the most vulnerable second language learners: low or non-literate adults with at the most primary schooling in their native language.

The following good practices were discussed.

**Liechtenstein Languages (LieLa)** is an association with international experience that creates teaching material for teachers and course instructors in different languages and for different levels. **Manuel Frick, Minister of Social Affairs and Culture of Liechtenstein**, explained the project's methodology and outcomes. LieLa is characterised by a highly interactive methodology that focuses on a playful and active teaching and learning process. The LieLa method consists of a tried and tested mix of various successful practices. The lessons are conducted exclusively in the target language. It offers foreign language courses for schools, early support for mother and child, and intensive oral communication starter courses (with or without literacy course) for adult and young refugees. The project has been positively received and is now active in Germany, Turkey, and Luxembourg. Some challenges persist, such as the dependency on local organisations, and the differences with local dialects (dialects in Liechtenstein can be hard to understand, even for native German-speakers).

With project **Buur en Natuur** (*Neighbour and Nature*), **Natuurpunt** Region Ghent (nature conservation society active in Flanders and Brussels) and **Amal** join forces. The project wants to bring newcomers, oldcomers, and nature lovers together in nature. **By walking together, you get to know each other and nature better.** The project wants to give residents with a migration background a taste of nature in Ghent in an accessible way. It also offers a great way to train your language skills. At the same time, the project gives an impulse to Natuurpunt's goal to further diversify its group of volunteers.

**Taalarena** is a project of the **Steunpunt Onderwijs** (*Education Support Centre, a service in Limburg province*) to create Dutch language practice opportunities for adult learners and their children. The approach is based on a successful methodology from Scandinavia (*Language learning in the wild*). Taalarena is embedded in the Erasmus+ project (**Second Language Learning in the Wild**). For this project, the province of Limburg cooperates with Iceland, Sweden and Denmark. The method bridges language lessons and everyday situations by **creating a safe learning environment for language learners outside the classroom** ('the arena': doctor's office, bakery, etc.). Parents and their children are guided and supported to participate in situations where they can interact with Dutch speakers. In this way, the project also contributes to greater participation and inclusion. They are prepared in a classroom at first, then practice 'in the wild', and afterwards have a moment to reflect again in the classroom.

**Rucksack KiTa** is a language and education programme for kindergarten children between four and six years old with an international family history, as well as their parents/family and educational institution. The focus is on general and multilingual language education integrated into everyday life. Rucksack KiTa is located at the **interface between the formal learning place KiTa and the informal education and support offers**. Parents/families and the day care centre build an educational partnership from which both sides benefit in the long term. Parents go to weekly Rucksack group meetings at the daycare centre. At these Rucksack meetings, parents receive multilingual exercise material to try and talk about. Parents also get the time to ask questions regarding their child. At home, they can do related activities with their child. These should be done in the family's language, in order to promote and support the child's multilingual skills. The educational team at the daycare centre takes up the same Rucksack KiTa topics in the new language and, thus, promotes the development of the children's speaking skills.

## *Inspiring approaches to labour market integration*

Strategies towards labour market integration are consistently adapting to new insights. This session notes the evolution of labour market integration services, highlighting innovative methods and cases. After an introduction by **Thomas Liebig**, Senior Migration Specialist in the International Migration Division at OECD, several delegations shared their good practices, approaches, or insights. **Michael Handler** works for the Directorate-General for Integration at the Department for the Coordination of International Affairs for the Federal Chancellery of Austria. **Tim De Koning** works for the Department of Employment at Atlas, the Agency for integration and civic integration in the city of Antwerp (Belgium). **Alessia Vetere** shared insights from the Central Directorate for Labour, Training, Education, and Family for the Autonomous Region Friuli Venezia Giulia (Italy). And lastly, **Paola Alvarez** shared the perspective of IOM (Regional office in Brussels), as Senior Regional Thematic Specialist for labour mobility and social inclusion.

Presenting trends and challenges in labour market integration of migrants, Thomas Liebig from the OECD shared that **migrant employment is at record levels in the EU**. All OECD countries (except Poland) had an increase between 2021 and 2022. However, important gaps remain:

1. **Integrating very low-educated migrants.** Successful programmes can recognise migrants' different starting points via assessments, referring migrants to the right trainings and identify education needs.
2. **Bridging the gender gap in employment rates between men and women.**
3. **Taking a whole-of-family perspective on integration** noting differences in employment rates between native-born and immigrant women. Several countries provide second chance offers as alternative pathways.
4. **Ensuring sustainable employment for beneficiaries of international protection.** Noting employment rate by reason for migration and duration of stay, we can often reveal a trade-off between rapid and lasting labour market integration.
5. **Better using the skills and qualifications of migrants.** The integration of highly educated migrants is a particular issue. They are less likely to be in employment than their native-born peers in all countries, while this is true among the low-educated in one-third of countries only. **If highly educated immigrants had the same employment rate as their native-born counterparts, the EU would have over one million more highly educated people working.** As for overqualification, host-country degrees reduce employment differences with the native born by one-third OECD-wide and more than half EU-wide, which asks the question about the recognition of foreign qualifications.
6. **Facilitating the school-to-work transition for native-born descendants of migrants.** Shares of NEETs (Youth Not in Employment, Education or Training) are rising. There is a need for support to remedy insufficient networks, lack of knowledge about the labour market, and discrimination. As far as native-born youths with foreign-born parents are concerned, despite an improvement in the labour market in most countries, their **transition from school to work** is still more difficult.
7. **Making sure that migrants have needed language skills while minimising lock-in effects.** Language training is often not sufficiently linked with labour market needs, in spite of evidence of effectiveness of such specialised training.

A good approach to labour market integration strategies entails **engaging and coordinating with multiple stakeholders**. As migrant employment is shaped by many factors, many



ministries and agencies are consequently involved. Labour market integration cannot be achieved without employers, and this means **overcoming information asymmetries and enhancing transparency**. This is often manageable with MNEs, but harder with SMEs. Furthermore, non-traditional stakeholders (such as charities, associations, sports clubs etc.) are increasingly engaged in labour market integration. **Different stakeholders have different objectives, and these may not always align.**

Sharing insights from the Federal Chancellery of Austria, Michael Handler shared the framework in which its labour market integration policies are situated. The **Recognition and Assessment Act (AuBG) regulates the assessment and recognition of qualifications obtained abroad** with an easier and simplified recognition procedure, even for persons without qualification documents. The service includes an online recognition portal, counselling centres, and the covering of costs associated with the recognition process. The **Austrian Integration Fund (ÖIF)** promotes the labour market integration of persons entitled to asylum and subsidiary protection as well as displaced Ukrainians. In addition, the new integration service for skilled workers provides a wide range of integration measures for skilled workers and qualified migrants as well as for companies. **The Federal Chancellery supports projects within the framework of national and European funding instruments on a needs-oriented basis, depending on regional necessities.** In 2024, this includes 35 projects with a focus on labour market integration with a funding amount of EUR 4.98 million.

Austria's current priorities are skilled-labour migration, challenges with illiteracy of those who received asylum and subsidiary protection, and the integration of women with a refugee background. Handler proceeded by sharing some of Austria's good practices. This included the **Mentoring for Migrants** initiative which aims to bring together experienced mentors and well-qualified people with a migration background (mentees) to support them in integrating into the labour market. Another good practice are the **Career Platforms**, which bring companies together with immigrants and are free of charge for both. In advance, experts discuss personnel requirements, necessary qualifications and the specific procedure of the career platform with the company. A third example is the **Integration Service for Skilled Workers**, which supports qualified immigrants and their families by providing information, advice and networking on key aspects of living and working in Austria. It offers opportunities to learn German, assistance with the recognition of foreign qualifications, as well as further training opportunities. **COMPASS** is a project to support the labour market integration of highly qualified women with a migration background with the aim of finding employment, training, further education opportunities or support in founding a company through an extensive programme of events with job-specific topics. **Lobby.16** supports young refugees through a mixture of career guidance and an intensive course to prepare them for school and place them in apprenticeships, as well as needs-based support until the end of their apprenticeship. **Quantensprung IV** is a modular measure for the qualification and labour market preparation of migrants and aims at long-term self-sustainability and social participation. It includes specialist language courses at level B2, learning support, labour market and career guidance, job application workshops, IT workshops and job coaching.





Up next, Tim De Koning presented Atlas. **Atlas** is the agency for integration and civic integration of the city of Antwerp. In Belgium, the communities and regions are responsible for integration policies. Consequently, their legal aspects, practices, policies and budgets differ. Since 2001, Flanders has developed an integration programme which offers language courses, social orientation courses, individual counselling, pathway to employment, and a participation programme. **Atlas' target groups**

are organisations and society, adult newcomers, and minor newcomers. One of its core tasks is to support, stimulate and guide the integration process, aiming for independent and proportional participation, access to all services, active citizenship, and social cohesion.

Some newcomers claim benefits. This can be done, for instance, at the **Openbaar Centrum voor Maatschappelijk Welzijn** (OCMW, *Public Centre for Social Welfare*) of the city of Antwerp. This deals with social welfare and exclusion of the most vulnerable groups in society. In 2016, Antwerp was confronted with the consequences of the crises in Syria, Libya and Iraq. In this context, a project collaboration was initiated where Atlas provided substantive support to the OCMW. This was done together with the public employment service, several civil society organisations and some private partners. This collaboration led to the **establishment of a Central Reception Office** in 2021. The cooperation aims to lead living wage newcomers in Antwerp to sustainable employment in an accelerated manner. Atlas supports this by identifying activation potentials/thresholds from the start without language barriers. This leads to a better assessment of the newcomer's potential. During a social impact measurement in 2021, it became clear that **clients who, in addition to an integration pathway, also started directly with an activation pathway were more quickly employed than clients in a linear pathway**. Additionally, in cooperation with Antwerp's Activation Department, several preliminary and strengthening pathways for activation clients were organised. Here, the focus is on strengthening generic skills necessary to function in a workplace (digitalisation, workplace-specific vocabulary, planning and organisation, etc.). An important decree change took place in March 2022, requiring counsellors to **check whether a non-working integrator is registered with the Vlaamse Dienst voor Arbeidsbemiddeling en Beroepsopleiding** (VDAB, Flemish Service for Employment and Professional Training). In addition, a pilot project was started together with VDAB in response to an **integrated intake**. VDAB Antwerp and Atlas wanted to get to know these mutual customers better and be able to provide tailor-made advice. To this end, Atlas developed and tested a methodology to assess the needs and possibilities of the integrator. The counsellor discusses the person's ambitions and goals, and examines their training, work experience and competencies. This information is passed on to VDAB. The pilot project ended in March 2023. The case discussion remained a useful forum for certain migrants who want to take quick steps towards work.

Alessia Vetere, from the **Central Directorate for Labour, Training, Education, and Family** for the **Autonomous Region Friuli Venezia Giulia** (Italy), shared best practices, models, and cases, from a regional and cross-border viewpoint through the **EURADRIA project**, which offers an **integrated territorial perspective on labour market management**. EURADRIA is a project co-funded by the EaSI (EaSI – EURES – Cross-border partnership and support to

cooperation on intra-EU mobility for social partners and EEA countries) programme of the EU. EURADRIA's objective is to keep **supporting mobility in the cross-border area, by ensuring qualified assistance to workers and companies**. The geographical scope is the region between Italy and Slovenia, comprising the Friuli Venezia Giulia region in Italy, and the statistical regions of Goriška, Obalno-kraška, and Notranjsko-kraška in Slovenia. If you work in one EU country and live in another country and return every day, or at least once a week, you are considered a cross-border commuter under EU law. EURADRIA consists of nine virtual and physical spaces dedicated to cross-border initiatives already in place, where **the partnership is focused on the resolution of hindrances to mobility: safety at work, disability, taxation, family allowances and sickness**. The establishment of a permanent cross-border observatory supervised by the Friuli Venezia Giulia Autonomous Region helps to detect and monitor the trends and dynamics affecting the cross-border market.

As multiple factors must be taken into account with labour market management – think of the multiple and specific needs of users, and the necessity to have a structured and responsive labour market management between levels – the Friuli Venezia Giulia region opts for the one-stop-shop approach. This approach can be translated into a potential model to support and promote integration: **a cross-border one-stop-shop approach**. This can be highly complex (multistakeholder, multicompetence, multilevel). When **translating labour market management into a comprehensive approach to 'living and working conditions'**, we open up possibilities to provide effective response to crisis and risk management. However, this cannot happen without increasing responsiveness, efficiency, rationalisation of the use of services, maintaining a human-centred approach with attention to specific needs, and enhancing preparedness of services. Vetere explained how the arrival of Ukrainians under temporary protection showed how the abovementioned model was put into a concrete application. The elements of **target identification** (who are the newcomers), **primary needs identification** (assessing minimum standards through living and working conditions), and **specific labour market needs identification** (upskilling, reskilling, access to specific profession under specific conditions, employers' engagement) were put to the test. This was realised through the **Regional Integrated Emergency Plan for Ukrainians (LIFeFor-U)**, which accessed measures in the areas of labour, education, training, and family. By May 2022, **'living and working' workshops** were provided, along with **individual assessments**, with the integrated participation of PES, EURES, guidance centres, family services, third sector organisations, and cultural mediators. This approach consolidated over the following months, with a first monitoring round in February 2023.

Lastly, **Paola Alvarez from IOM's regional office in Brussels** shared four of IOM's initiatives to bolster labour market integration and supporting migrant mobility. The **COMMIT** project facilitates the integration of resettled refugees in Croatia, Italy, Spain, and Portugal. The project recognises that successful integration depends on fostering the mutual exchange between refugees and host communities, as well as enabling structural conditions. Based on these assumptions, the project aims at maximising integration outcomes by **enhancing pre-departure orientation** (connecting refugees and reception community members; developing targeted pre-departure orientation training material); **strengthening community support** (activating mentorship schemes); and **fostering transnational exchange** between newer and more experienced resettlement countries to identify and disseminate lessons learnt and best practices beyond the project's geographical scope. Secondly, the 45-month project **Include-EU** aims to contribute to building more inclusive and cohesive European societies by **enhancing transnational knowledge and experience sharing, cooperation and**



partnerships between local and regional authorities from Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Romania, Slovenia and Spain. Its activities include improving knowledge and capacity building; implementing and assessing pilot projects; and fostering regional exchange on integration policy and practice. Partners in this project are the AER, ANCI Toscana, Region of Crete, City of Tilburg, Department of Equality and Feminism of Catalonia. Thirdly, **Displaced Talent for Europe (DT4E)** facilitates the mobility of displaced talent in Jordan and Lebanon to Belgium, Ireland, Portugal, and the United Kingdom (soon also France and Slovakia). Removing obstacles to access the labour market is beneficial for everyone involved: refugees, businesses, host communities and the economy. The DT4E project counts on a network of private sector organisations such as chambers of commerce, business associations or sector federations, as well as higher education structures. DT4E enjoys strong relationships with governments and public employment agencies in the destination countries. It offers displaced talents **support in job matching; in making an informed decision; in the visa application process; in the preparation for the employer of the arrival of the recruited talent** (including pre-departure training and orientation for talent and employer, *and* the relocation logistics); **and in post-arrival training**. Lastly, IOM's **Migration Information Centres (MICs)**, offers **free advice and services for migrants**. Alvarez focused on the specific example of the MICs across three Poland, Romania, and Slovakia in the context of the response to the situation in Ukraine. The MICs provided essential information on integration services, including language training and cultural orientation; legal counselling; labour market inclusion support; and protection and engagement with partners to promote migrants' human and labour rights.



## ***Communicating policies and results to a broader public***

The session on communicating policies and data results on social and civic integration brought together experts from Denmark, Flanders, the United States, Norway, and the European Commission to discuss their unique challenges and strategies for effective monitoring and communication of integration outcomes. This session underscored the diverse approaches to measuring and communicating integration outcomes across different regions, highlighting the importance of data-driven strategies combined with effective communication techniques.

**Henrik Torp Andersen**, from the **Ministry of Immigration and Integration in Denmark**, introduced the **Danish Integration Barometer**, which has been monitoring integration at national and municipal levels since 2012. Its purpose is **to put focus on the integration goals of the Danish government; to monitor those goals to meet expectations at the national and local levels; and to provide a basis for future policy developments**. The barometer covers the following key indicators: employment, public benefits, education, Danish language skills, vulnerable neighbourhoods, and crime. This list has likewise been expanded over the years with indicators such as Danish citizenship, education (completed and ongoing), and population. By tracking these outcomes through both register and survey data, the barometer provides a comprehensive overview of the integration process in Denmark, and reveals which measures have had positive short-term and/or long-term effects. For instance, early labour market entry and other work-related instruments have performed well on the short-term, but have been proven to be less effective in the long-run. The barometer's coverage has adapted to an ever-changing migration context, and has seen added editions tailored to different groups, such as newly arrived refugees and family reunified persons from 2015 onwards, and now also displaced individuals from Ukraine.

In **Flanders**, monitoring results and integration measurement is communicated by the **Agentschap Binnenlands Bestuur** (*Agency for Home Affairs*) through the **Barometer Samenleven** (*Barometer Living Together*) and the **Survey Samenleven in Diversiteit** (*SID, Survey Living Together in Diversity*). The **Barometer Samenleven**, inspired by the abovementioned Danish instrument, is a dashboard that depicts eight objectives of living together in diversity. For each objective, it shows the direction in which the situation is evolving on a yearly basis. It looks at five origin groups in Flanders and Brussels: people of Belgian origin; people of foreign EU-origin of the first generation; people of foreign non-EU-origin of the first generation; people of foreign EU-origin of the second generation; and people of foreign non-EU-origin of the second generation. It is informed by the following indicators (mix of administrative data and survey data): labour participation; education; social and community networks; connectedness; citizenship; financial capacity; equal treatment; and knowledge of Dutch. The **Survey Samenleven in Diversiteit** (SID) is a large-scale survey conducted in 2017 and 2022 among about 4,500 and 5,100 people of Belgian, Moroccan, Turkish, Polish, Romanian and Congolese origin, respectively. In 2022, a group of persons of Afghan origin was also surveyed. The survey pays particular attention to aspects of living together in diversity that remain underexposed in administrative data and general population surveys. Both instruments provide accessible and clear indicators for integration policy. Communication strategies in Flanders include: conferences to provide nuanced discussions; social media engagement; press releases and summaries; engagement with political parties and parliamentary commissions; interpretation of data by third parties.

Katherine Lotspeich from the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) explained that integration in the US is closely linked to the path to citizenship. Each year, USCIS processes around 10 million applications, with 878,500 individuals taking the oath of citizenship. The US has a substantial foreign-born population, with 46.2 million individuals making up 13.9 per cent of the population. Initiatives like the **Naturalization Nudge Study** seek to understand why eligible individuals do not pursue naturalisation and explore how small interventions ('nudges', such as receiving a letter) might encourage higher application rates. The study assesses the difference between treatment and control group application rates, fee waiver use, naturalisation test outcomes, and naturalisation success. Results are expected in 2025. Lotspeich also highlighted tools like the **Eligible to Naturalize Dashboard**, which displays data on the population of lawful permanent residents (LPRs) who may be eligible to naturalise. The data captures country of birth, state, and core-based statistical area, and includes people who obtained LPR-status but have not yet filed for naturalisation.

Nadiya Fedoryshyn from Norway's Division of Analytics at the Directorate of Integration and Diversity (IMDi) discussed Norway's approach to measuring and communicating integration outcomes. The Norwegian monitoring framework includes the following indicators, monitoring data on immigrants and their Norwegian-born children: education and skills; labour market participation; income and living conditions; political integration; and social integration. Communicating these outcomes involves targeting different audiences, including national and local authorities, politicians, NGOs, journalists, as well as the broader public, and using tools like in-depth reports, time series, and benchmarking and local outcomes. Through this data, the IMDi has revealed a number of **challenges, such as child poverty, inactivity, crime, and discrimination**. On the other hand, it has showed **positive trends in terms of inclusion, skills, language training, and education**. The IMDi's strategy includes publishing data in accessible formats and engaging with the media to disseminate findings effectively.



Tina Zournatzi, Head of Communication at DG Migration and Home Affairs from the European Commission highlighted the need to **move beyond crisis narratives and tell a broader story about migration and integration**. Effective communication requires more than just presenting data; it involves crafting messages that resonate with public concerns and daily lives. The Commission is developing campaigns that use storytelling to appeal to

self-interest frames, in sectors like care, construction, and agriculture. By working with human stories, the Commission aims to demonstrate why migration is beneficial for Europeans, such as its role in supporting essential economic sectors. Projects funded by the Asylum, Migration, and Integration Fund (AMIF), such as the MAX and CHANGE projects, aim to improve the perception of migration. Zournatzi also emphasised the challenge of **combating misinformation and disinformation**. The Commission has been particularly successful in anticipating and debunking misinformation about Ukrainian refugees. In response to Russia's attempts to spread the narrative that the EU was not managing the influx of Ukrainian refugees, the EU communicated openly, regularly, and clearly about the number of permits for temporary protection and the figures on education and labour participation of Ukrainians in the EU.

## *Psychosocial well-being of newcomers*

Several studies show that psychological and psychosocial problems are more prevalent among people with a migrant background. In this session, we elaborated on some research findings and underlying causes that affect psychosocial well-being and thus possibly the (civic) integration process. The session was hosted by **Amal** (Agency for integration and civic integration in the city of Ghent, Belgium) and **CESSMIR** (Centre for the Social Study of Migration and Refugees), an interdisciplinary consortium focused on social impact at **Ghent University**. CESSMIR has about 150 researchers from seven different faculties. Three principles are central to CESSMIR: interdisciplinarity, societal impact, and participation. They encourage interdisciplinary research projects and teaching, organise training for practitioners and policy makers, and maximise stakeholder involvement throughout the research process. **Prof Ilse Derluyn (director)** and **Dr Floor Verhaeghe (coordinator)** of CESSMIR presented main research findings from different recent studies.

In particular, CESSMIR proposes the following actions to increase the psychosocial well-being of people with a migrant background. Firstly, we need **flexible and tailor made integration programmes**, adapted to the (psychosocial and other) needs of people with a migrant background. Secondly, we should support people with a migrant background to build out a **strong social network and support system**. Thirdly, we advocate for a **more accessible and culturally sensitive psychosocial healthcare system**.

Addressing mental health concerns involves recognising the diverse ways they manifest, influenced by factors such as context, culture, and education. Many mental health issues stem from **coping with extraordinary circumstances**. While past traumas from migration can shape experiences – PTSD and depression are more prevalent with refugees than among the general population –, **daily stressors often exert a more immediate impact**. Maintaining connections with family can alleviate feelings of depression, while perceived discrimination can exacerbate mental health challenges. Furthermore, building robust social networks is crucial, emphasising commonalities over differences. For instance, buddy projects can foster resilience in navigating societal complexities. Recognising the importance of social support, CESSMIR calls for tailored integration programs bolstered by strong community ties. Addressing mental health necessitates a comprehensive approach, including **integrated psychosocial support and accessible, culturally sensitive healthcare systems**. Understanding social wellbeing and individual mental health hinges on **a delicate balance between protective and risk factors**. Protective factors, such as proficiency in the host country's language, religious affiliation, and strong family ties, can bolster resilience. Conversely, risk factors like insecure legal status, social isolation, and unemployment pose significant challenges. **Intersectionality** adds another layer of complexity, recognising how various aspects of identity intersect and influence mental health outcomes. Moreover, both the host and home country contexts contribute to this. By enhancing the surrounding context, including legal protections, social support networks, and economic opportunities, we can foster better mental health outcomes for individuals and communities alike.

The session proceeded with examples which have actively put the propositions into practice. The first suggestion to support people with a migrant background to build a strong social network are exemplified through the work of **Amal** with its **Open-Bar** activities, and of **Kompis Sverige**. The second suggestion to provide flexible and tailor-made integration programmes are exemplified through the provision of **Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS)** by IOM Poland, concluding with project **Parkoer** by Amal.

Recognising the importance of intercultural activities, and inspired by signals from newcomers who would like to meet in group, *and* from buddies who would like to meet newcomers, Amal started organising **Open-Bar** in 2019. It brings newcomers and citizens of Ghent, older than 17 years old, together on a monthly basis. Open Bar is usually hosted in the evening, in several locations. There are no specific language requirements to participate. Amal **collaborates with organisations in Ghent – often non-profit organisations that offer leisure activities**. Participants either receive an explanation of the kinds of activities that organisation hosts, *or* sometimes can actively engage in one. This allows participants to learn more about Ghent's offer in an accessible manner. The focus is social life, enlarging and enhancing one's social network, culture, sports, etc.

**Kompis Sverige** was founded in 2013 by friends Pegah Afsharian and Natassia Fry. They had a dream of creating a more inclusive Sweden by facilitating meetings between different people in society. They wanted to create a long-term organisation based on equal meetings and a mutual exchange of knowledge and experience. **Social contacts are needed to fully establish in Swedish society**, however this piece of the puzzle is often missing. Kompis Sverige's mission is to **make meaningful meetings happen between new and established Swedes**, thereby increasing the participants' knowledge and understanding of each other. Activities are free of charge and span buddy programmes and social activities, but also online language cafés and development work. In 2023, over 6000 additional individuals, and over 240 municipalities joined the activities. Output results are mostly situated in increased language proficiency, stronger social networks, heightened levels of participation and knowledge of other cultures, and growing connectivity and trust in society. Natassia Fry shared some findings of their work, and some recommendations towards the future. For instance, a lot of the participants have jobs, but do not feel part of the community. **As a business, a holistic approach is needed** – simply recruiting migrants does not suffice. Instead, dare to look beyond this, such as addressing discrimination. Another recommendation is to **look at what works**: informal initiatives are not *accidental* initiatives. They require support and funding just as much as formal initiatives.

Sharing good practices on how to prepare communities to respond to psychosocial needs of newcomers, **IOM Poland** explained their approach to **Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS)**. Migration processes often evoke significant stress among individuals involved. To effectively address this, there is a pressing need for capacity building among first-line responders. This entails equipping them with skills in psychological first aid, integrating MHPSS into various programmes, establishing community-based initiatives for mental health, and fostering intercultural communication. Furthermore, **community engagement plays a crucial role in mitigating the challenges associated with migration**. Through cultural, creative, artistic, and social relational activities, communities can foster a sense of belonging and support among migrants. However, amidst these efforts, the **uncertainty surrounding residence permits stands out as a significant negative factor**. This uncertainty compounds the stress and anxiety experienced by migrants, underscoring the importance of addressing legal uncertainties in migration policies and procedures.

With the project **Parkoer**, a young adult programme hosted by **Amal**, young newcomers in Ghent between seventeen and nineteen years old who want to enhance their Dutch language acquisition can join **various activities in the summertime**. Everyday over a period of a few weeks, they can engage in a range of activities to learn more about Ghent and Belgium, and to get to know other young people. A counsellor offers a tailor-made programmes for each participant.





### *Integration in times of crisis*

This session, hosted by the **Agentschap Binnenlands Bestuur** (*Agency for Home Affairs of the Government of Flanders*) workshop delved into the topic of integration of newcomers amidst crises like the conflict in Ukraine and the Covid-19 pandemic, discussing strategies and practical solutions. The inspiration for this workshop was the **Flemish Taskforce Ukraine**. Flanders has appointed a task force consisting of the leading officials (or their delegates) from the relevant Flemish policy domains: housing, labour, education, civic integration, and health. The responsibilities of the task force include accurately mapping local services, as well as working to expand them; establishing practical agreements with the federal government regarding the allocation of individuals based on local realities and capacities. The task force maintains an overview of the specific measures implemented by the Flemish policy domains. These measures and the associated needs are then mapped out to prepare for discussions within the Flemish Government. Additionally, the task force collects and shares relevant information with local authorities, Flemish policy sectors, and the federal level, serving as a point of contact. Moreover, the task force assists various domains in developing temporary measures through flexible frameworks.

The session proceeded with the workshop, presenting a fictitious crisis scenario in Europe caused by natural disaster. This causes large numbers of displaced people seeking refuge in Europe. Some are EU-citizens, some receive an Eco Sanctuary Status, granting them right to education, employment, healthcare, and housing. In groups, the participants shared insights and perspectives, and had a moment to reflect on existing policies and crisis measures in place. The aim of the fictitious scenario was to reveal actual commonalities and differences, and take stock of lessons learned.

## ***New digital tools and instruments in the integration process***

Social and global changes and evolutions always have an impact on the integration and civic integration sector. Refugee crises, increased asylum influx, decree changes, society patterns and super-diversity and, of course, an increasingly digital world. These evolutions determine who our clients are and what they need to successfully integrate. And that customer, the newcomer, the potential integrator, no longer comes to the counter but is everywhere: at home, in the workplace, abroad, etc. Also, these customers expect a modern and reliable digital government, driven by new technology. With an average in Flanders of 45,000 integrators per year, from over 165 different nationalities with a different social economic status, this will require mass customisation.

As a government, we must redesign our service model, to pursue an organisational policy that is data-driven, predictive and agile, closer to the customer, more customised and with more autonomy. Digitalisation can lead to a (r)evolution of the Flemish integration policy. But how do we tackle this? How do you make sure to not miss the digital train? How do you make strategic choices and realise digital services that are secure, scalable, future-proof and customer-oriented? This session, hosted by **Agentschap Integratie en Inburgering** (*AgII, Agency for Integration and Civic Integration*) discussed the customer model of the future.

The Covid-19 pandemic pushed organisations into a digital survival strategy. EU-funds and Flemish recovery financing provided a financial injection and restart in the digitisation of our services and sector. Looking back at the first phase of this transformation teaches us the following: digitalisation is a means and not an end in itself. A significant investment budget made a restart possible, but creating a single digital gateway for citizens requires cooperation between local and international public services.

**Privacy by design: embedding privacy into information technology, business practices and network infrastructures.** Organisations understand the need to both innovate and safeguard the personal and confidential data of our customers, employees, and partners. This has become increasingly challenging in the era of 'big data'. Data and data exchange are the core elements; but we need a rethought information and privacy policy at the local, national, European and international level. **Modern e-government:** cloud and platform strategies in the government sectors should be agile, reliable, and scalable. Also, we should stimulate data exchange in areas of migration and integration, through process streamlining and collaboration. **Everyone on board: investing in digital inclusion and skills, while designing solutions based on customer needs.** We require a human-centred design as a starting point in every process, product, and project.

**Do not underestimate the human impact.** Almost half of the Belgian population do not have basic digital skills, which is more than 30% below the European target of 80% (Digital Act 2030). Research also shows that households with a lower income and lower levels of education have less access to the internet and a device. As we work towards an impactful e-inclusion policy, we want everyone to participate, including the digitally vulnerable integrator. We work **towards digital emancipation** (e.g. through local digi-hubs to support integrators in digital skills, or through incorporation of digital citizenship in social orientation courses) and **towards digital accessible services** (e.g. human-centred design, provision of an equal alternative; and user engagement end-to-end). Digitally proficient employees are an important precondition for this. **The change is not about tools.** But the digital transition requires employees to change the way they work and adapt customer processes and services. As an organisation, therefore, invest in sustainable change management.

## ***Social participation as a stimulus for networking and language learning***

Since 1 January 2023, the participation trajectory is a new, compulsory part of the civic integration programme in Flanders, alongside learning Dutch, a social orientation course, and a pathway to employment. This new addition entails that persons integrating do a minimum of 40 hours of activities to expand their social network and practice Dutch. This can be done through volunteer work, a conversation group or buddy work, for instance. The Agentschappen Integratie en Inburgering (*Agencies for Integration and Civic Integration*) are tasked with organising a qualitative participation programme for persons integrating. To achieve this, **Atlas**, the agency in the city of Antwerp works together with a strong network of partner organisations. In addition, local administrations are tasked with forming a regional organisational network to connect key actors in the participation process. They do this together with the Agencies and with the support of AMIF and Agentschap Binnenlands Bestuur (*Agency for Home Affairs of the Government of Flanders*). Hosting this session, Atlas highlighted how it organises and aligns this participation trajectory with the needs of persons integrating and the organisations that open their offerings to them. A number of partner organisations also shared their own experiences and approach.

Adding this new participation trajectory puts an emphasis on **social participation from the very start of the integration process**. Based on a survey from the Government of Flanders, migrants often experience a great need for social participation. Even before this was added as a compulsory part of the integration programme, Atlas has had a long tradition in social participation activities, such as finding activities for integrators to practise Dutch and meet other people, such as volunteering, sports, buddy programmes, learning to ride a bike, conversation groups, workshops, cultural activities, digital activities. The integrator looks for an activity with the **support of the programme counsellor in the agency, and a collective online platform (ikdoemee.be)** showing the available activities. The website was created with attention to accessibility for non-native speakers (e.g. filter on knowledge of Dutch; translation into multiple languages). The agencies are responsible for bringing together an offer of available activities, and do so in close cooperation with local governments; the latter should be in the lead. Upon completion of the activity, integrators should provide a document to prove their participation, provided by the host organisation.

As the implementation of the participation programme is a fairly recent addition, there are still challenges. For instance, organisations often refer to having little to no experience in working with non-native speakers. Additionally, organisations often are wary of the extra administration requirements, for instance the need to provide proof of completion, or the publication of activities on the website. Support through AMIF and the Government of Flanders has helped to remedy such obstacles; to gather organisations with expertise and experience; to expand capacity; and to ensure local governments stay in the lead. Looking towards the future, Atlas wishes to **focus on quality**, and to underline both to partner organisations and the integrators that **the participation programme is an added value for the process**, and not just a 'box to tick'.

Some good practices of participation activities were discussed.

**DUO for a JOB** puts job-seeking young people with a migration background in touch with over-50s, who volunteer to **transmit professional experience and guide them in their vocational project and job search**. These connections furthermore strengthen social cohesion and local solidarity. DUO for a JOB offers the following aspects of the mentoring trajectory: **discover** (info session and intakes); **train** (training the mentors); **match** (matching

the duo and assisting the first encounter); **guide** (signing the agreement and supervising the duos); and **evaluate** (evaluation at the end of the mentoring). Mentees are 18-33 y/o, have a nationality or origin from outside the EU, and have a residency permit that allows them to work in Belgium. Mentors are over 50 y/o, have professional experience, and are available for two hours/week for six months. About one in two of the young people find a stable job (min. three-month contract); seven in ten find a positive solution (e.g. job, internship, training). Since 2013, 7500 duos have been matched; with over 2000 active mentors; working with 100 employees, in 17 branches in Belgium, France and the Netherlands.

**Atlas and the city of Antwerp** have collaborated to expand services through **buddy services for foreign language volunteers with low levels of Dutch**. The most important tasks of a voluntary buddy include ensuring that the volunteer finds their way to the organisation; discovering together with the volunteer how to carry out the volunteer task; teaching the volunteer words and phrases needed to perform the task; and helping the volunteer connect with other volunteers, staff and clients of the organisation. Migrants with a beginner-level Dutch want to start volunteer work for various reasons, however it can be challenging to find suitable organisations, plan appointments, and/or learn the task. Buddies (candidates) can apply at the **Vrijwilligerspunt** (*Voluntary point*) where they follow training sessions, for instance on speaking clear language and stimulating conversation; on the civic integration trajectory and their role in the social participation component; and on diversity-sensitive communication and addressing discrimination. Then, candidates should also familiarise themselves with the voluntary tasks and the organisation in which the integrator will be volunteering. Vrijwilligerspunt matches the buddy and the integrator. They do the volunteering, and after completion the buddy can continue being a point of contact.

**Atlas and Karel de Grote Hogeschool** (institution of higher education in Antwerp) work together in a buddy programme for students. The programme **matches a newcomer (Atlas buddy) and a Belgian student (student buddy)** to create informal language-learning contexts, and to provide opportunities to enhance one's social network. The newcomers are aged 18 to 30, have the ability to express themselves and have a conversation in Dutch, are an independent to the extent that they can make their own appointments. The student buddies are future social workers in college. They should be **open-minded and adopt an open communication style**, as they will support their buddy during their learning process. In this process, the college is responsible for the follow-ups, for advancing certain methodologies, and to do peer reviews. Atlas, on the other hand, functions a mediator between the buddies, organises group activities, and likewise provides follow-ups and peer reviews. Some challenges include language misunderstandings, difficulties in finding 'the perfect match', or scheduling issues. Some ways in which Atlas and the Karel de Grote Hogeschool have sought to address these obstacles is, for instance, giving buddies a chance to meet in small groups; provide ample time for introductions; and importantly specifying the importance of flexibility before joining the project.