



Wilfried
Martens Centre
for European Studies

**‘Our European Way of Life’
as the Guiding Principle**

IN FOCUS

**Shifts in the Understanding of Immigrant
Integration at the EU Level**

November
2022

Summary

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Conceptualising immigrant integration has been a challenging task for the EU. Over the past 17 years, the EU institutions have been issuing non-binding guidance documents on the matter. An analysis of the successive iterations of these guidance documents reveals both continuity and change. On the one hand, the European Commission and the Council have consistently requested that immigrants respect the ‘basic values of the European Union’ and adapt to their new environments. On the other hand, during this same period the Commission and the Council have attached different meanings to the concept of a two-way process of interaction between the host society and the newcomers.

In documents issued in 2004–5, the two-way process contained the requirement for both immigrants and citizens of the receiving country to accommodate each other. Shared forums, intercultural dialogue, and education about immigrants and immigrant cultures were part of the mix of recommended measures. Following shifts in public opinion, disquiet about problems with migrant integration and rhetorical pushbacks against immigration in the 2010s, the European Commission adjusted its guidance. In a definition formulated in 2020, ‘mutual accommodation’ gave way to an emphasis on the adaptation of migrants to the receiving society and the obligation of the host country to help migrants integrate into the mainstream culture.

In the current parliamentary term (2019–present), the von der Leyen Commission has promoted the overarching concept of ‘Our European Way of Life’ to accompany the new understanding of the two-way process of migrant integration. This concept is anchored in the EU’s secular values of human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality and the rule of law. The concept bears a strong resemblance to the European *Leitkultur*, or ‘guiding culture’, of respect



for the constitution and the values of the Enlightenment, as coined by the author Bassam Tibi in 1998.

The EU-level shift from a request for mutual accommodation to putting the requirement for adaptation onto the newcomers does not, by itself, result in better immigrant integration outcomes. Member states' policies remain responsible for migrant integration. Nevertheless, the definitions contained in the Commission's guidance documents are symbolic of the prevailing climate of opinion at the EU level. The impression that 'Brussels' was previously asking Europe's indigenous populations to give up parts of their culture and customs provoked a backlash against the EU and, in some member states, discontent with democracy. In that light, the current definition of the two-way process and the emphasis on liberal democratic principles is more likely to sustain popular support for the European project and for sustainable immigration and integration policies at home.

Keywords Migrant integration – Integration as a two-way process – Our European Way of Life – European Commission – European Council – Culture



Immigration on the rise¹

In response to labour shortages, the member states are taking measures² to increase the recruitment of non-EU workers. In July 2022, the EU27 unemployment rate was 6.0%, historically the lowest on record.³ Companies have reported labour shortages in a variety of sectors, including construction, the health and social care sectors, food production and tourism.⁴

In 2021 the EU27 issued more than 493,000 new residence permits for work purposes for a period of longer than 12 months.⁵ This represents the most intensive drive to recruit workers from outside the bloc since at least 2008. Family reunification continues to be the predominant mode of immigration, yet the workers' share of EU-bound immigration, when compared with family reunification, immigration for education and other types of immigration, is now larger than it has ever been.

The hiring of non-EU workers is set to gain even more impetus in the coming years. Germany, Spain, Austria, Portugal, Slovenia and several other members are in the process of lowering the administrative requirements for migrant workers to enter their national labour markets. In addition, as a result of the war against Ukraine, the EU has been welcoming millions of mostly female and well-educated Ukrainian refugees under the temporary protection legislation.

The existing and expected future inflows of legal immigrants from countries such as Ukraine, Morocco and India are bound to contribute to economic growth and spur innovation. These inflows also are reopening the question

¹ I would like to thank Peter Hefele, Rainer Münz and Claudia Masi for their invaluable comments. Any errors and omissions remain mine.

² Euractiv Network and J. Allenbach-Amman, 'Labour Shortages Felt All Over Europe', *Euractiv.com*, 14 September 2022, accessed at <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/labour-shortages-felt-all-over-europe/> on 27 September 2022.

³ Statista, 'Unemployment Rate of the European Union (EU27) from January 2000 to June 2022' (24 August 2022), accessed at <https://www.statista.com/statistics/685957/unemployment-rate-in-the-european-union/> on 27 September 2022.

⁴ The low level of unemployment is due to long-term demographic problems, namely low fertility rates and the resulting decline in the working-age population, and short-term factors such as the disruption due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the outflow of male Ukrainian workers to join the national army in its defensive war with Russia.

⁵ In total in 2021, the EU27 issued more than 1.3 million new residence permits for work purposes. However, of these, almost one million short-term permits were issued by one country, Poland, to Ukrainians, who often switched their residences between Ukraine and Poland. Eurostat, 'Residence Permits – Statistics on First Permits Issued During the Year' (3 August 2022), accessed at https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Residence_permits_-_statistics_on_first_permits_issued_during_the_year&oldid=574359 on 5 October 2022.



of migrant integration policies. While some of the workers will return home, others are bound to stay and bring along their spouses and children.

Most migrants integrate relatively well into their countries of reception, and the Covid-19 pandemic demonstrated how essential non-EU workers are for the bloc's economies. Yet, immigration, especially on a larger scale, challenges social solidarity and tests the absorption capacity of the host societies. Diversity does not necessarily support the sense of community.⁶ Countries such as Sweden and Denmark have taken in more migrants than they can integrate, leading to gang violence in some urban areas⁷ as well as seriously economically deprived ethnic ghettos. A number of countries are struggling with the integration of some Muslim immigrant groups.

It goes beyond the scope of this piece to evaluate the impact of immigration on the host nations and the effectiveness of national immigrant integration policies in the EU. Observers differ⁸ in their assessments. Moreover, the Migrant Integration Policy Index, the Indicators of Citizenship Rights for Immigrants and other integration indices yield differing results.

With national populists and the extreme right often capitalising on conspiracy theories on migration,⁹ there is little doubt that official rhetoric on societal cohesion, whether from EU-level or national politicians, is important for ensuring public support for immigration and integration policies. Brussels often gets the blame for the real or alleged negative consequences of migration to European societies. In most cases, these claims cannot be substantiated. Still, on the symbolic level, EU institutions' definitions of migrant integration set the tone for immigration debates across the bloc. The EU also provides significant funding to the member states to facilitate migrant integration.

⁶ I. Goldin et al., *Exceptional People. How Migration Shaped Our World and Will Define Our Future* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), chapter 8.

⁷ T. Lindner, 'Gangy Göteborgu: Reportáž o tom, proč ve Švédsku přibývá vražd střelnou zbraní', *Respekt*, 4 September 2022, accessed at <https://www.respekt.cz/tydenik/2022/36/gangy-goteborgu> on 5 October 2022.

⁸ R. Koopmans, 'Multiculturalism and Immigration: A Contested Field in Cross-National Comparison', *Annual Review of Sociology* 39 (July 2013), 147–69.

⁹ A. Krasodonski-Jones, *Suspicious Minds: Conspiracy Theories in the Age of Populism*, Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies (Brussels, 2019), accessed at <https://www.martenscentre.eu/publication/suspicious-minds-conspiracy-theories-in-the-age-of-populism/> on 5 October 2022.



The 2000s: integration with a hint of multiculturalism

In the treaties, immigrant integration is a competence reserved to the member states and, as a ‘support competence’, it explicitly may not be transferred¹⁰ to the Union. This constitutional fact has not stopped the EU institutions from issuing non-binding guidance on the matter. Over the last two decades, the Council and the Commission have issued such documents in 2004–5, 2011, 2016 and 2020.

The language deployed in these guidance documents is conceptually ‘thin’ in that no specific mode of immigrant integration, such as multiculturalism or assimilation, is mentioned. However, a closer look at these guidance documents indicates shifts in the official understanding of what immigrant integration means. Over the course of 17 years and as a result of widespread political criticism of the failures of immigrant integration,¹¹ the EU approach to integration—however symbolic it may be due to the absence of any EU competence in the matter—has abandoned implicit references to multiculturalism in favour of a new approach that emphasises the assimilation of immigrants into the host societies.

In November 2004 the Justice and Home Affairs Council provided¹² a definition of immigrant integration that was in line with the views that prevailed at the time. The implied multiculturalism meant that migrants (as well as some other minority groups) were entitled to participate as equals in societal processes without having to relinquish¹³ their own culture, religion or language.

In a nod to this view, in 2004 the Council defined integration as a ‘dynamic, two-way process of mutual accommodation by all immigrants and residents of member states’. It went on to say,

¹⁰ E. Neframi, *Division of Competences Between the European Union and its Member States Concerning Immigration*, European Parliament (2016), accessed at <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/f0e07f04-ce2e-11e5-a4b5-01aa75ed71a1/language-en> on 27 September 2022.

¹¹ M. Weaver and agencies, ‘Angela Merkel: German Multiculturalism Has “Utterly Failed”’, *The Guardian*, 17 October 2010, accessed at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/oct/17/angela-merkel-german-multiculturalism-failed> on 7 October 2022. For academic criticism, see, for example, T. Virgili, ‘Whose “Identity”? Multiculturalism vs. Integration in Europe’, *European View* 19/1 (2020), 1–9.

¹² Council of the European Union, *Common Basic Principles for Immigrant Integration Policy in the EU*, Press Release, 2618th Council Meeting Justice and Home Affairs, 14615/04 (Presse 321), 19 November 2004, 19, accessed at https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/library-document/common-basic-principles-immigrant-integration-policy-eu_en on 27 September 2022.

¹³ S. Castles, H. de Haas and M. J. Miller, *The Age of Migration. International Population Movements in the Modern World*, 4th edition (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 270.



Integration . . . demands the participation not only of immigrants and their descendants but of every resident. The integration process involves adaptation by immigrants. . . . It also involves the receiving society, which should create the opportunities for the immigrants' full economic, social, cultural, and political participation. Accordingly, Member States are encouraged to *consider and involve both immigrants and national citizens in integration policy*, and to communicate clearly their mutual rights and responsibilities.¹⁴

The mutual accommodation between migrants and residents entailed, among other things, shared forums, intercultural dialogue, and education about immigrants and immigrant cultures; mainstreaming integration policies and measures in relevant policy portfolios; and developing goals, indicators and evaluation mechanisms to adjust policy and evaluate progress. Although the document does not mention multiculturalism, the definition of integration implies that cultural and linguistic differences between groups might persist for generations.

The 2004 document nevertheless did *not* fully embrace multiculturalism. The document specified that 'everybody resident in the EU must adapt and adhere closely to the basic values' of the EU and its members, and it referred to the principles of liberty, democracy and human rights as defined in the EU treaties. Knowledge of the host society's language and history was 'indispensable to integration'.¹⁵

Subsequent documents developed the Council definition of integration while attempting to draw domestic populations into the integration efforts. The 2005 Commission Communication, *A Common Agenda for Integration: Framework for the Integration of Third-Country Nationals in the European Union*¹⁶ proposed, among other things, 'strengthening the ability of the host society to adjust to diversity by targeting integration actions at the host population',¹⁷ as well as programmes to make sure that 'immigrants understand, respect and benefit from common European and national values'.¹⁸ It recognised that 'difficulties can arise where religious or cultural beliefs or practices conflict with European fundamental values or with national law'.¹⁹

¹⁴ Council of the European Union, *Common Basic Principles*, 19. *Emphasis is mine.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁶ European Commission, *A Common Agenda for Integration: Framework for the Integration of Third-Country Nationals in the European Union*, Communication, COM (2005) 389 final (1 September 2005).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.



From 2019: towards a thin European *Leitkultur*?

In subsequent years, a shift occurred in the thinking of EU politicians and policymakers. Recognising deficiencies in the integration of immigrants, including the Islamic religious fundamentalism that was thriving in some immigrant communities, the Commission stated in its 2011 *European Agenda for the Integration of Third-Country Nationals* that ‘not all integration measures have been successful in meeting their objectives. Integration policies also require the will and commitment of migrants to be part of the society that receives them.’²⁰

A factsheet²¹ that accompanied the subsequent document issued by the Commission in 2016, the *Action Plan on the Integration of Third Country Nationals*, stated that ‘it is a joint responsibility and a common interest to invest and work together on integration’.²² The Action Plan alluded, as the previous documents did, to the socio-economic gaps between host societies and (non-EU) immigrants and the continued discrimination and prejudice that some immigrants faced. As for the definition of ‘the two-way process’, the 2016 Action Plan stated: ‘This dynamic two-way process on integration means not only expecting third-country nationals to embrace EU fundamental values and learn the host language but also offering them meaningful opportunities to participate in the economy and society of the member state where they settle.’²³ This signalled a shift in the understanding of the two-way process. This conceptual turn became even clearer in the next iteration of the Commission’s guidance document (see the next section).

The EU-level turn towards the cultural interests of the local populations was driven by the political backlash against immigration in some countries, as well as by public opinion. Eurobarometer, a series of public opinion surveys conducted on behalf of the EU institutions, ran an EU-wide survey on the integration of immigrants in 2017. The survey found that the European public was divided on the subject, with 54% of respondents considering integration to be successful in their local area or country and 40% stating that it was not. Huge majorities in each member state thought that limited efforts

²⁰ European Commission, *European Agenda for the Integration of Third-Country Nationals*, Communication, COM (2011) 0455 final, (20 July 2011), 2.

²¹ European Commission, *Action Plan on the Integration of Third Country Nationals*, Factsheet (7 June 2016).

²² European Commission, *Action Plan on the Integration of Third Country Nationals*, Communication, COM (2016) 377 final, (7 June 2016).

²³ *Ibid.*, 5.



by immigrants to integrate could be a potentially major obstacle to integration.²⁴ More poignantly, a 2019 Pew survey found that some 62% of EU citizens believed that, in general, the EU was ‘out of touch’ and did not understand the needs of citizens. Across the 10 countries surveyed, a median of 51% believed immigrants wanted to remain distinct from the broader society.²⁵

By the time the von der Leyen Commission was appointed in 2019, the bloc was experiencing an identity crisis due to the rising perception that immigration and its consequences had been detrimental to the cohesion of European societies and that some communities, particularly those originating in several majority-Muslim countries in Africa and Asia, did not share a sense of belonging to Europe’s nation states. In response, President von der Leyen created a new post in the European Commission, that of vice president for promoting our European way of life. This post was created in autumn 2019 and is held by the Greek centre–right politician Margaritis Schinas. Schinas’s job description includes coordinating changes to the EU’s asylum and migration legislation, and to migration and security policies in general. It also includes the integration of migrants who have entered a country legally into the job market and society.

Much ink has been spilled to describe the meaning of ‘our European way of life’. In his hearing in front of the European Parliament in October 2019, Vice-President-Designate Schinas repeatedly referred to Articles 2 and 3 of the Treaty on European Union, as embodying the ‘European way of life’. These two declaratory articles state that the Union is founded on the principles of freedom, democracy, equality and the rule of law. The rights of persons belonging to minorities are to be protected. The Union should combat discrimination and exclusion.

During the parliamentary hearing, it transpired that Schinas’s portfolio was anything but banal. Socialist, Green and Liberal Members of the European Parliament criticised the title of his portfolio for allegedly pitting domestic populations against immigrants and asylum seekers and playing ‘into

²⁴ Large majorities also thought that discrimination against immigrants could be a major obstacle to integration. Eurobarometer, *Integration of Immigrants in the European Union* (April 2018), accessed at <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2169> on 27 September 2022.

²⁵ R. Wike, J. Fetterolf and M. Fagan, *Europeans Credit EU With Promoting Peace and Prosperity, but Say Brussels Is Out of Touch With Its Citizens*, Pew Research Center (19 March 2019), accessed at <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2019/03/19/europeans-credit-eu-with-promoting-peace-and-prosperity-but-say-brussels-is-out-of-touch-with-its-citizens/> on 27 September 2022.



the hands of right-wing extremists.²⁶ In his replies, Schinas denied these accusations and pointed to inclusion as his key approach to resolving problems. When asked against whom the European way of life should be protected, Schinas singled out Islamic terrorists and those ‘who do not allow their children to go to school’, presumably on cultural or religious grounds. He also took aim at the far right and those ‘who do not give food to asylum seekers’.²⁷ Schinas did stress the importance of Europe’s cultural heritage, and its richness and diversity. The critics achieved a change in the title of Schinas’s portfolio, from ‘protecting our European way of life’ to the less defensive ‘promoting our European way of life’.

Although Schinas never mentioned the term, either during his parliamentary hearing or afterwards, I argue that the Liberal Member of the European Parliament Sophie in ‘t Veld was right when, during the hearing, she equated the promotion of ‘our European way of life’ with an advancement of ‘the European version of *Leitkultur*’.²⁸ The term was first introduced by the Syrian–German sociologist Bassam Tibi in his book *Europa ohne Identität? Leitkultur oder Wertebeliebigkeit* (Europe Without an Identity? Guiding Culture or Arbitrariness of Values).²⁹ Tibi’s definition is remarkably close to how Margaritis Schinas described his portfolio during his parliamentary hearing. According to Tibi, the European *Leitkultur*, or ‘guiding culture’, includes modernity, democracy, secularism, Enlightenment values and civil society. Although in her intervention, in ‘t Veld suggested that the promotion of a *Leitkultur* was only appealing to the (far-right) fringes, in my view the concept plays a positive role in forging tolerance and togetherness.

²⁶ European Parliament, *Hearing of Margaritis Schinas, Commissioner-Designate (Protecting Our European Way of Life)*, Verbatim report (3 October 2019), accessed at <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/resources/library/media/20191004RES63431/20191004RES63431.pdf> on 27 October 2022.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

²⁹ B. Tibi, *Europa ohne Identität? Leitkultur oder Wertebeliebigkeit* (Munich: Siedler Verlag, 2000).



Our European Way of Life and immigrant integration

Despite fears to the contrary, through his activities and speeches Vice-President Schinas has not promoted any particular lifestyles or daily behaviours. He has seldom referred to Christianity, let alone to the ‘cultural supremacy’ of the EU’s indigenous population in comparison to non-EU migrants, as his left-wing critics had warned he might.

A conceptual shift regarding immigrant integration has occurred under the von der Leyen Commission. In 2020, when the Commission issued its *Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021–2027*,³⁰ it retained the idea that migrant integration is a two-way process. Like the previous EU-level documents, the 2020 *Action Plan* deploys inclusive language throughout. It repeats almost verbatim this sentence from the 2004 guidance: ‘The integration process involves adaptation by immigrants . . . who all have rights and responsibilities in relation to their new country of residence’.³¹

However, the manner in which the two-way process is defined has changed. The 2020 document replaces the 2004 definition of integration as a ‘dynamic, two-way process of mutual accommodation’³² with a new one. The new definition removes the requirement that native majorities take active steps towards accommodating the newcomers and get involved in intercultural policies of migrant integration. Instead,

. . . if integration and inclusion are to be successful, it must also be a two-way process whereby migrants and EU citizens with migrant background are *offered help to integrate and they in turn make an active effort to become integrated*. The integration process involves the host society, which should create the opportunities for the immigrants’ full economic, social, cultural, and political participation. It also involves adaptation by migrants who all have rights and responsibilities in relation to their new country of residence.³³

³⁰ European Commission, *Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021–2027*, Communication, COM (2020) 758 final, (24 November 2020).

³¹ As in the previous guidance documents, the term ‘adaptation’ does not feature prominently in the 2022 *Action Plan*. The term is notable for its appearance in successive iterations of the EU migrant integration guidance.

³² Council of the European Union, *Common Basic Principles*, 19.

³³ European Commission, *Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021–2027*, 2. Emphasis is mine.



Beyond creating opportunities, the majority societies are no longer asked to adjust to different groups of immigrants. Instead, their role is to help the newcomers, and their descendants, to integrate into the majority culture. The newcomers and their descendants need to assimilate into the European culture because the majorities of the indigenous populations are keen to preserve their laws and customs.

Assessment and conclusions

At first glance, the slogan ‘Our European Way of Life’ appears to represent little more than an elaboration on the ‘treaty’ values, enriched by verbal references to the EU’s cultural diversity and the common roots of Europeans.

Nevertheless, the change in the Commission’s definition of the two-way process indicates a substantial change in how EU societies perceive their role vis-à-vis non-EU immigrants. The two-way process is no longer about setting mutually agreeable rules among a number of tenants in a shared accommodation, one of whom happens to be the historical resident of the dwelling. The two-way process of 2020 rather suggests a situation where the householder family welcomes guests but takes care to explain what the expectations, customs and habits of the household are, and helps the newcomers to adjust to these rules.

This subtle change in the definition of immigrant integration links to an almost-revolution in the Commission’s rhetoric in a related policy area, that of irregular immigration. In the 2000s and 2010s commissioners tended to emphasise the welfare of irregular migrants attempting to reach Europe. Contrast this with a speech by Ursula von der Leyen in Kastanies in Greece on 3 March 2020. Condemning the Turkish attempt to instrumentalise migration by bussing migrants and refugees to the Greek border and assisting them to cross to Greece, von der Leyen thanked the Greek government for not allowing the migrants in and ‘being our European . . . shield in these times’.³⁴

³⁴ European Commission, ‘Remarks by President von der Leyen at the Joint Press Conference With Kyriakos Mitsotakis, Prime Minister of Greece, Andrej Plenković, Prime Minister of Croatia, President Sassoli and President Michel’, Kastanies, Greece (3 March 2020), accessed at https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_20_380 on 26 September 2022.



By changing the definition of immigrant integration, the EU institutions have belatedly picked up on the calls for Europe to honour its ‘common cultural roots, common history and common religious traditions’.³⁵ The European centre–right has pointed out that some immigrant and religious communities tend to oppose the founding European principles and that people ‘who come to the EU must accept variety, tolerance and religious freedom’.³⁶

An abstract framework

‘Our European Way of Life’ and the accompanying EU-level understanding of immigrant integration are rather abstract concepts, as their creators were no doubt aware. This abstractness stems from at least three factors.

First, cultures and ‘ways of life’ are not static. Societies and social mores evolve; the decline of religion in Europe is just one among the many changes that are occurring.

Second, national cultures and identities across the 27 member states vary. A framework for those cultures can thus do little more than to emphasise the values of the EU embodied in Articles 2 and 3 of the Treaty on European Union. Whether the concept of ‘our European way of life’ helps to develop a collective identity for the EU,³⁷ in addition to protecting national cultures, is open to question. Given the wording of the treaties and the division of powers in the EU, immigrant integration needs to be defined and implemented at the national level. In that sense, any EU-level ‘guiding principles’ are and will remain ‘thin’ and not prescriptive in terms of specific integration policies.

Third, at the EU and national levels integration continues to be defined ‘with an eye to deficiencies’ with regard to language acquisition, educational achievement and employment rates.³⁸ There is no doubt that these deficiencies need to be addressed, despite some positive results for some immigrant groups and some countries so far. Adherence to the basic values prevalent in the given society is ensured by applying the law equally to natives and newcomers and their descendants.

³⁵ N. Lambert, ‘Auch die EU braucht ein ideelles Fundament’, *Die Welt*, 13 December 2005, accessed at <https://www.welt.de/print-welt/article183928/Auch-die-EU-braucht-ein-ideelles-Fundament.html> on 22 September 2022.

³⁶ M. Weber, ‘The EPP Group in the European Parliament: Asylum and Other Immigration Issues’, in V. Novotný (ed.), *Opening the Door? Immigration and Integration in the European Union* (Brussels: Martens Centre for European Studies, 2012), 495.

³⁷ Lambert, ‘Auch die EU braucht ein ideelles Fundament’.

³⁸ S. Luft, ‘Germany: Integration as a Sensitive Topic With Many Facets’, in V. Novotný (ed.), *Opening the Door? Immigration and Integration in the European Union* (Brussels: Martens Centre for European Studies, 2012), 379.



Nevertheless, the prevailing understanding of migrant integration remains stuck between references to constitutional values on the one hand and addressing socio-economic deficiencies on the other hand. Achieving ‘highly binding and widely accepted results’ in the EU-wide migrant-integration debate, as requested by a German centre-right politician in an article in 2005,³⁹ seems an impossible task in a set of 27 constitutional democracies build around diverse national cultures. These lines need to be drawn at the national level, respecting the given country’s traditions.

Where there is scope for improvement is in fostering a common sense of belonging to the locality, nation or the EU. The EU institutions can rightly point out the Union’s founding values. Immigrants and their descendants should be expected to understand the history and traditions of their host country and to acquire its language. The *Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021–2027* is a nudge in this direction.

What role for rhetoric on immigration and integration?

Given the very limited role of the EU institutions in regulating immigrant integration, rhetorical and definitional changes at the EU level have no direct impact on the integration of immigrants.

Yet rhetoric does play a role in preserving the social cohesion of European societies. Europe’s mainstream parties have tended not to respond effectively to the grievances of the native majorities regarding problems with some migrants’ adjustment to European ‘ways’.⁴⁰ Uninformed debate and a reluctance to address the grievances of the receiving societies are due to the fact that the statehood of most EU members was built around linguistic and ethnic principles that by their nature, were not tolerant of cultural and religious diversity at the time that Europe’s nation states were being created. Europe’s history of mass ethnic cleansing also makes it problematic for politicians to discuss culture and identity.

This reluctance has allowed parties with roots in the extreme right to break existing immigration taboos and claim electoral victories. In September 2022 this was the case in Sweden and Italy. In Sweden, rising gang crime concentrated in areas populated by the ethnic underclass paved the way for the victory of the right-wing Sweden Democrats (*Sverigedemokraterna*) in

³⁹ Lambert, ‘Auch die EU braucht ein ideelles Fundament’.

⁴⁰ Luft, ‘Germany: Integration as a Sensitive Topic with Many Facets’, 385.



the country's parliamentary elections.⁴¹ In Italy, the policy of allowing the disembarkation of immigrants who irregularly cross the Mediterranean has helped to propel to power the right-wing identitarian party, Brothers of Italy (*Fratelli d'Italia*). The political mainstream's fear of breaking taboos has allowed the rise of the political fringes, which have no such fear, through their divisive and sometimes violent rhetoric.

The above analysis has suggested that EU-level rhetoric is now approving of the desire of the host societies to preserve elements of their cultures. The shift in the definition of the two-way process indicates that the EU institutions are no longer asking the indigenous majorities to change their culture, even if there had been the suggestion of such a need for adaptation in the past. In view of the ongoing political instrumentalisation of problems with immigrant integration, such official assurances are welcome.

As a final remark, in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, the political mainstream in Western and Northern Europe, seeking to to assuage the concerns of voters, tended to deny that immigration was taking place. As a result, problems with integration were all too often ignored; sometimes newcomers were asked to live in areas separate from the host population. It appears that in Central and Eastern Europe today, similar denials are being repeated, despite non-EU immigrants increasingly settling in these countries. Discussing immigration and integration may not carry immediate political profit. Yet, the articulation of immigration issues is likely to benefit mainstream parties in the long run by creating a political environment that does not provide political opportunities for anti-systemic parties. Despite sometimes uncomfortable debates, it is up to national politicians and policymakers to define what integration specifically means in their country.

⁴¹ P. Neuding, 'Sweden's New Powerbrokers', *The Spectator*, 14 September 2022, accessed at <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/why-sweden-s-anti-immigration-party-is-gaining-ground> on 22 September 2022.



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External editing: Communicative English bvba
Editor: Vít Novotný
Typesetting: Victoria Agency

This publication receives funding from the European Parliament.
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