

Linguistic integration of adult migrants: towards the evaluation of policy and practice

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European states are nowadays outrunning themselves in developing and applying policies which aim to restrict or even – as it appears sometimes – entirely deter the inflow of migrants into their territories, and they are becoming more and more creative in this process. They spend vast sums of money on tightening their external borders, running wide-scale border control operations, and forcibly removing non-citizens. Some countries have recently even devised a system whereby they construct and fund orphanages in countries of origin in order to justify the return of unaccompanied migrant children to some of the most violent regions of the world.

But such actions of states not only conflict with their obligations under international law, but are also futile, because the human race is mobile and the movement of people cannot really be stemmed. People move, and will continue to do so, in pursuit of a better life, sometimes fleeing persecution, but also because they want to be part of another society, and are attracted by the values and way of life of a different nation.

European societies have always been pluralistic and diverse. Migrants continue to be present in virtually all countries, living side-by-side with the nationals of their host states. When walking the streets of many European cities or towns one can easily be struck by their ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity. And we should embrace this diversity, cherish it and learn to appreciate to what extent migrants enrich our societies. They broaden our perspectives, teach us empathy and help to overcome our Eurocentric, not to say egocentric, perceptions and prejudices. Provided of course that they are genuinely given the opportunity to become a part of our society.

Instead of wasting resources on the impossible and counterproductive task of deterring the influx of immigrants, states should *genuinely* focus on assisting newcomers in integrating into their host surroundings. Integration is key for the successful cohabitation of immigrants and nationals in a country, and language-learning is a crucial element thereof. Without properly learning the language of the host state, migrants will never become a part of the society they live in, or identify themselves with their host state and the values shared by its majority population, which is indeed what so many people fear.

Luckily, European states are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of developing comprehensive language-teaching policies for immigrants. There is, however, no uniform practice in this area, and while in some states the policies are well-developed and have been in place for several years, in others they are just in their early phases of application. There are three aspects of language-learning that should be discussed here, as they are of particular importance in the debate about integration measures: 1) the practice of using command of a language as a prerequisite for receiving a visa, residence permit or citizenship; 2) the faulty assumptions regarding immigrants' sole responsibility for the integration process; and finally 3) the situation of asylum seekers.

In the last few years several European countries have developed a policy of applying the rather undefined, or in any event non-homogeneous, criterion of the foreigners' "integration" into a host society. Until recently integration was a goal in itself, and extending immigrants' rights was a tool in achieving this aim, rather than a "reward". Nowadays, in some states migrants must first prove that they are loyal and motivated, possess a certain knowledge of the history and culture of the host country and a satisfactory command of the official language, before they can obtain a permanent residence permit or receive citizenship. A similar practice has been developed with respect to family reunification.

However, these policies *do* foster exclusion and they *are* problematic from a human rights perspective. They are frequently discriminatory in nature, as the measures are applied with respect to nationals of some countries while not to others, and because the tests may be construed in such a way, so as to expect knowledge from foreigners that even many nationals of the given state do not possess and are not expected to possess. Moreover, it must be borne in mind that migrants may have difficulties with learning a foreign language as a result of – for example – poor language skills, old age, illiteracy, or the lack of time and strength for learning due to exhausting work. Finally, the impediments imposed on family reunification are particularly troubling, as they may entail a violation of the human right to respect for family life. It is thus essential that states evaluate their integration policies, draw conclusions from them, and improve them in such a way, so as to guarantee that they are humane and fully respect the human rights of all migrants in the integration process.

The policies currently applied by some European states are the result of a faulty assumption that immigrants are solely or mostly responsible for their successful integration into the host society, which is the second issue that needs to be addressed in this context. In principle, we all are aware of the fact that integration is a two-way process, as this is not a new concept. Nevertheless, this is not always obvious from states' policies and actions.

States bear a responsibility towards all persons staying in their territory, and therefore have a duty to create an environment for newcomers that facilitates their adaptation. In order to encourage migrants to integrate, they should be granted access to employment and education, as well as permitted to participate actively in public life. The right to family reunification should be respected without imposing unnecessary impediments, and the host state should offer sufficient opportunities to learn the language, with due regard of migrants' often vulnerable position. Last but not least, society itself must be open towards newcomers – it must show understanding for their language problems, and assist them in solving their daily troubles.

Finally, the situation of asylum seekers deserves special attention. Asylum seekers seem to be neglected by states as regards access to language-learning and other integration measures, because their future in the host country is uncertain, and their stay could turn out to be temporary. However, states should realise that asylum seekers are lawfully residing in their territory pending the asylum procedure, which may last from several months to several years. Asylum seekers must not be subjected to involuntary idleness, but should enjoy all their human rights, including access to employment and the host country's education, which also entails language-learning.

To conclude, I would like to cite Tenzin Gyatso, the present Dalai Lama, who said: “A good motivation is what is needed: compassion without dogmatism, without complicated philosophy; just understanding that others are human brothers and sisters and respecting their human rights and dignities. That we humans can help each other is one of our unique human capacities.” And it really is as simple as that.