



# Concept Note on the Impact of Migration and Integration Policy

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## Thematic Stakeholder Dialogue – Concept Note on the Impact of Migration and Integration Policy (on the local Level) (WP1, WP4, WP7)

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**We-ID Identities - Migration - Democracy** is a three-year project (2025-2028) that analyses the transformation of individual and collective identities, social cohesion and democracy in the midst of migration, demographic change and current crises in Europe. The consortium includes eight partners: Georg August University of Göttingen, the University of St Andrews in Scotland, the Bocconi University, the Institute for the Study of Population and Human Studies (Bulgaria), the Institute of Social Sciences Ivo Pilar (Croatia), Max Planck Society (Population Europe), the Council of the Baltic Sea States, and The Civics Innovation Hub.

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## 1. Control Sheet

Version History			
Version	Date	Modified by	Summary of Changes
D2.1 Concept Note V1	30.09.2025		Initial Version

## 2. List of Participants

Participant No.	Participant Organisation Name	Country
1 (Coordinator)	University of Goettingen (UGOE)	Germany
2	Bocconi University (UB)	Italy
3	University of St. Andrews (USTAN)	Great Britain
4	Institute for Population and Human Studies (IPHS)	Bulgaria
5	Institute of Social Sciences Ivo Pilar (IPI)	Croatia
6	Max Planck Society (MPG)/Population Europe	Germany
7	Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS)	IGO, Sweden
8	THE CIVICS Innovation Hub (CIVICS)	Germany

## 3. Objectives

The European Union's promise of prosperity and security is based on the principle of "unity in diversity" and the guarantee of fundamental freedoms, rights and democratic participation of its citizens. The vast majority of EU citizens share these values. At the same time, democracies are in crisis. Populist parties are fuelling fears and spreading the narrative that migration leads to a loss of identity. There is no doubt that migration always raises the question of identity and belonging. How do we organize integration and participation in such a way that cohesion is created despite diverse identities? The project "Identities - Migration - Democracy" (We-ID) is therefore concerned with the transformation of individual and collective identities, social and territorial cohesion and democracy under the conditions of demographic change, particularly with regard to migration and growing population diversity. We-ID follows an innovative research path by a) analysing the impact of migration on identities, belonging, cohesion and democracy, taking into account both the impact on host

communities and the changes in the identities of migrants and their descendants, and b) elaborating the interrelationship between identities, cohesion, resilience and democracy. In addition to quantitative data analysis, we will use qualitative methods at the local level (e.g. pilot study in a border region, content analysis, case studies) to look for factors that strengthen resilient democratic communities. By consistently pursuing a transdisciplinary approach within our Policy, Advocacy and Research Lab (We-PARL) throughout the project, we will create a platform for mutual learning between different stakeholders from the European to the local level, while at the same time contributing to evidence-based and thoroughly discussed policy recommendations. In addition, based on our findings, we will develop materials such as toolboxes that can be used by practitioners and local actors (We-SCOUTS).

In detail, We-ID pursues the following objectives:

- Objective 1:** Revise and evaluate the relevant conceptual issues concerning identities, belonging and cohesion, and establish their relationship with resilience and democracy, with a particular emphasis on migration.
- Objective 2:** Map trends and patterns of identities, belonging and cohesion together with their drivers, including geographic differences, gender, age and education, as well as immigrant status and employment.
- Objective 3:** Investigate how the social identities and political participation of immigrants and their descendants differ across European countries, what factors influence identity and participation of immigrants, and what assumptions can be made for the future.
- Objective 4:** Extending objectives 2 and 3 through a regional pilot study in a Bulgarian border region. To analyse, how migration flows affect both the migrant communities themselves and their identities, and the communities exposed to new and large-scale immigration.
- Objective 5:** Development of an inclusive concept for resilient democratic communities (ReDeCos), through the identification (five case studies) of local factors that hinder or strengthen belonging.
- Objective 6:** In addition, development of a Civic Competences Toolbox (CCT) for local actors (We-SCOUTS) equipped with civic skills and competences to support local communities, moderate conflicts and controversies and create spaces for participation.
- Objective 7:** Establish the We-PARL - Policy, Advocacy and Research Lab - transdisciplinary platform, the tool which supports all thematic research areas foreseen in the project.
- Objective 8:** To disseminate We-ID findings, drawing on the outcomes and findings from the We-PARL, communicating them to a broader audience.
- Objective 9:** The project will identify factors at both national and local level that hinder social and political participation and at the same time develop policy recommendations on how to achieve equality and mitigate discrimination against women, LGBTIQ+ and ethnic minorities.

## 4. Purpose of the Deliverable

The work package 2 provides the conceptual foundations for a democracy and resilience-enhancing policy that also explores how policy-making can prevent and combat social and territorial marginalisation and discrimination, while also creating a sense of belonging and cohesion for all EU citizens and migrants. The work package will also strongly crosslink to the Policy Advocacy and Research Lab (WP7) and serve as input for the other scientific parts dealing with drivers, migration patterns and identities. The work package will address the crisis of democracy, which is reflected in the declining trust in institutions among EU citizens and the rise of populist and far-right parties in the EU. In deliverable 2.1 *migration policy* plays a very special role, as it has become the starting point for anti-democratic attempts by right-wing parties to undermine the EU, using narratives of "foreign infiltration" and loss of national identity. *Cohesion policy*, in particular *integration policy at EU and national level*, must also be critically scrutinised, as it is largely responsible for the opportunities for (ethnic, religious) minorities, migrants and their descendants, people with disabilities and people of different sexual orientations to participate in the (local) community.

## 5. European Asylum and Migration Policy

### 5.1 Development of a "Common European Asylum System"

With regard to asylum and migration, the EU faces a dual challenge: in addition to its legal responsibility for the protection of refugees – for example, under the Geneva Convention on Refugees – the integration of refugees into national societies must also be regulated. Therefore, the development of a "Common European Asylum System" (CEAS) began in the 1990s, leading to a gradual harmonization of national asylum and migration policies (Große Hüttmann).

Since the 1990s, the European Commission has issued numerous directives to harmonize national migration and asylum legislation. With the signing of the Schengen Agreement in 1985 and the abolition of border controls, close cooperation in migration, asylum, and visa policy was agreed upon, as the issuance of a visa by a Schengen country grants free access to the entire Schengen area (ibid).

The Dublin Convention of 1990 – now part of the CEAS – was a further step in the "Europeanization" of what was originally a purely national asylum policy. It determines which European state is responsible for processing an asylum application. The "Common European Asylum System" comprises numerous individual measures such as the Qualification Directive, which sets out uniform standards and principles for the recognition of refugees, as well as guidelines on reception conditions and asylum procedures in the EU member states (ibid).

In May 2015, the European Commission presented a "Migration Agenda" with further proposals, including the "hotspot" approach (supporting the states that are primarily responsible for registering and caring for arriving refugees, such as Italy and Greece, but also Cyprus and Malta) and the quota-based distribution of refugees among all EU states (ibid).

In September 2020, drawing on the experience of the sharp increase in refugee influx in 2015 and 2016, the European Commission developed the "Compact on Migration and Asylum." This compact is intended to accelerate asylum procedures and commits all EU member states to "European solidarity," but still leaves them the choice of how to exercise this solidarity. The options vary from accepting refugees according to a distribution key to participating in organizing the return of non-recognized refugees (ibid).

At the EU summit in Brussels in February 2023, a tougher migration policy was adopted, including tighter border controls, faster deportations, and the prevention of "irregular migration.". These agreements paved the way for the new common asylum policy, which will come into effect in April 2024. For the first time, asylum procedures will now be conducted at the EU's external borders. While the country of first entry will remain responsible for asylum applications in the future, migrants from Italy or Greece, for example, will be redistributed. Furthermore, a change in the criteria will make significantly more countries safe third countries to which deportations may be made. In addition, EU member states must make a firm commitment to accept migrants. A quota determines the allocation of asylum seekers. Countries that refuse admission are obliged to compensate them with cash payments or in-kind benefits (ibid).

## 5.2 How do migration and integration policies specifically influence the participation or discrimination of people?

Defining the role of the European migration policy, it is important to consider that often the *theoretical* definition and *practical* meaning of "integration" diverge: In practice, many policies pull for assimilationist approaches instead of integration (Varela et al., 2020). Integration indicators based on **assimilationist models** (e.g., civic integration reports or rigid test-based language policies) mask structural inequalities and shift the burden of integration entirely onto migrants (Varela et al. 2020; Dekker et al. 2015).

In addition, there is always the debate on the **role of citizenship for integration**: Citizenship is often required to access full social rights (Craig, 2015). Language integration as a prerequisite for citizenship is particularly problematic (Antesberger et al., 2025). The *Boundary permeability theory* draws a positive relationship between legal equality and greater adoption of the host culture, which means that legal access and inclusive citizenship can support host culture adoption, but not sufficient alone (Ersanilli & Koopmans, 2011). But does full citizenship also mean successful integration? Exclusive naturalization policies are said to signal a "lack of an inclusive immigration agenda" (Huddleston and Vink, 2013). Furthermore, if integration is framed as a **condition for citizenship or rights** (e.g. through language or civic tests), it risks reinforcing conditional belonging and institutional discrimination (Drangslund 2024; Antesberger et al. 2025).

Many European countries (e.g. Germany, Spain) show a "successful" **labour integration/participation** of migrants (Varela et al., 2020; Kosyakova's, 2025). Tailored employment services, informal (new) skills development and support for business ownership improve outcomes. Longitudinal studies show that integration improves over time, particularly when migrants enter early and engage in education and the labour market. An (early) fluent language acquisition is once again important. Developing targeted local interventions for groups known to be at risk of unemployment (e.g. refugees, women, young adults, etc.) (Craig, 2015). But Labour market policies that focus solely on economic self-sufficiency (individual dimension) ignore social inclusion, often leading to deskilling, segmentation, and persistent inequality, especially for women and racialized groups (Craig 2015; Lee et al. 2022; Marbach et al. 2025).

Furthermore, the **negative relationship between labor market policies and integration** must be taken into account: in countries where migrants are more disadvantaged in the labor market (correlated with lower income levels, overqualification, higher unemployment rates, larger unemployment gap), policies are better developed, while in countries where migrants are in a better position, they are underdeveloped (**policy responsiveness hypothesis** = policymakers develop more inclusive policies in response to the unfavorable labor market situation of migrants (De Coninck & Solano, 2023)).



**Access to rights, services (healthcare, housing, education, and employment), and social relationships** is often limited by legal and bureaucratic barriers, as well as discrimination based on race, religion and migrant status (Craig, 2015; Hahn et al. 2020; Rast et al. 2024; Coumans & Wark, 2024; Stevens et al., 2024). This highlights the need for anti-discrimination policies with human-rights based approaches. **Anti-discrimination policies** stand out as particularly important but must be coupled with inclusive labour markets and support for marginalized groups (Platt et al., 2021). Not all integration policies are equally effective and their impact varies across immigrant subgroups (ibid.). It is noteworthy that in countries with stricter anti-discrimination laws, the link between integration and perceived discrimination is stronger (caveat: no causality; Van Tubergen, 2025).

Policies lacking **local adaptability** or poorly implemented at the district or municipal level often fail to meet real needs despite formal access (Tjaden & Spörlein 2023), but they can **shape role of integration actors** such as the civil society (Baglioni et al., 2022).

### 5.3 What role do access points (e.g. migration offices) play in Integration?

**Access points** such as migration offices or language schools are frontline interfaces where inclusion or exclusion is concretely experienced. Language proficiency associated with higher employment chances and earnings, better social inclusion and equal access to rights (Antesberger et al., 2025).

These spaces can serve either as **gatekeepers** or **enablers**: As gatekeepers, they often enforce bureaucratic requirements (e.g., proof of integration, test certificates), creating insecurity and stress (Drangsdal 2024) and as enablers, if equipped with **cultural competence, translation services, and autonomy-friendly practices**, they can build trust and foster meaningful participation (Coumans & Wark 2024; Hahn et al. 2020).

Inconsistent practices across districts create **territorial inequality**, undermining equal access (Tjaden & Spörlein 2023).

**Since** Language proficiency associated with higher employment chances and earnings, better social inclusion and equal access to rights (Antesberger et al., 2025), **language courses** should start early in the integration process, aimed on long-term learning/integration and therefore offer autonomous and individualised learning plans, be frequently evaluated, embedded in broader integration efforts (employment, civic life, education), comprehensive, certified and standardized (Antesberger et al. 2025; Marbach et al. 2025).

Poorly designed or under-resourced access points **undermine policy implementation**, especially when interpretation, outreach, or user-friendly digital platforms are lacking (Hahn et al. 2020; Antesberger et al. 2025).

### 5.4 Which groups are in focus here?

Policymaking categorizes as follows (Garcés-Mascreñas & Penninx 2016, chap 5):

- **EU-Citizens vs. Third-Country Nationals (TCNs)**
- **Legal vs. irregular migrants**
- **“deserving” vs. “undeserving” migrants**

→ **not neutral**: they reflect political ideologies, assumptions about belonging, threat, productivity, or cultural distance

**Refugees and asylum seekers** are central in almost all studies due to their legal precarity and dependence on state services.

Female migrants often face compounded barriers—limited access to gender-sensitive services (health, language), family roles, and cultural stigmas (Drangslund 2024; Craig 2015; Fossati et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2022; Gewalt et al., 2019). Reports highlight disproportionate experiences of discrimination, both structural (e.g., language tests, bureaucratic hurdles) and interpersonal of **visible minorities and racialized migrants** (e.g., stereotyping by service providers) (Varela et al. 2020; Drangslund 2024). **Vulnerable groups** are female refugees, jobless men, and the elderly (Coumans & Wark, 2024).

**Low-income migrants** and those in **rural areas** are facing added isolation, fewer services, and greater stigmatization, especially in housing and healthcare (Coumans & Wark 2024; Rast et al. 2024). Low-skilled and Muslim men: face the strongest discrimination in the labour market (Platt et al. 2021). **Undocumented migrants**: Although not always addressed directly, this group is consistently excluded from services and remains legally invisible (Craig 2015; Hahn et al. 2020).

**Second-generation migrants** are sometimes inappropriately targeted by integration measures despite being born and socialized in the host country (Varela et al. 2020).

## 5.5 What potential do political measures have to raise awareness of discrimination and marginalisation?

Integration measures remain **fragmented** and are implemented very differently at the national level (Garcés-Mascareñas & Penninx 2016, chap 4). But even though cross-national differences in socio-cultural integration exist (Germany vs. Netherlands vs. France), differences are only modest (Ersanilli & Koopmans, 2011). Comparing **the local vs. the national turn** some authors describe a strong local turn (Garcés-Mascareñas & Penninx 2016, chap 6) while for other local policy networks seem to have limited effects (Dekker et al., 2015). The local turn in integration policy *may be* overstated in terms of actual impact (Tjaden & Spörlein, 2023). Integration efforts should consider local variations and support decentralized, **context-sensitive approaches** (Dekker et al., 2015). Different countries may need different integration processes and different policy effects (De Coninck & Solano, 2023).

**An inclusive framing of integration policies** (as two-way, intercultural processes) can promote awareness and challenge dominant assimilationist narratives (Garcés-Mascareñas & Penninx 2016; Varela et al. 2020). **But inclusive integration policies effects are limited (moderate)**, socioeconomic factors are more influential than national policy regimes (Ersanilli & Koopmans, 2011; Alves et al., 2024; Tjaden & Spörlein, 2023).

**Recognition of racialised mechanisms** (e.g. “raciolinguistic frontiers”) in citizenship and language policies can stimulate more equitable policy design and public debate (Drangslund 2024).

**Participation of migrants in policy design** (co-production) can shift the focus from individual adaptation to shared responsibility and rights-based integration (Dekker et al. 2015; Craig 2015). **Civil society partnerships and intercultural forums** at the local level have proven effective in bridging mistrust and promoting belonging—especially when migrant voices are not only heard but shape decisions (Antesberger et al. 2025; Varela et al. 2020).

Political communication and awareness campaigns must **challenge conditionality narratives** and shift public attention to the structural barriers faced by migrants, e.g. housing, health, language access.

Finally, **consistent monitoring and evaluation** of integration measures, especially those tied to funding, can help ensure they promote cohesion rather than entrench exclusion (Emilsson 2015; Tjaden & Spörlein 2023); but **integration effort reports** need to be improved (Varela et al. 2020).

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## 6. Thematic Stakeholder Dialogue in the We-ID Project

Almost all of the challenges of our time cannot be viewed in isolation, but must be addressed transdisciplinary. This applies especially to science. In the WE-ID project, research and innovation are developed in close cooperation with a wide range of stakeholders – those for whom the project's outcomes and practical relevance matter most. Alongside our own academic expertise, we seek to integrate perspectives from other disciplines, civil society, policymakers, and directly affected communities. This broad participation forms the foundation for setting legitimate priorities and directions within the project. Our approach emphasizes genuine dialogue and mutual exchange rather than a one-way transfer of knowledge from science to practice.

The We-ID Stakeholder dialogue consists of three phases, as shown in Figure 1:

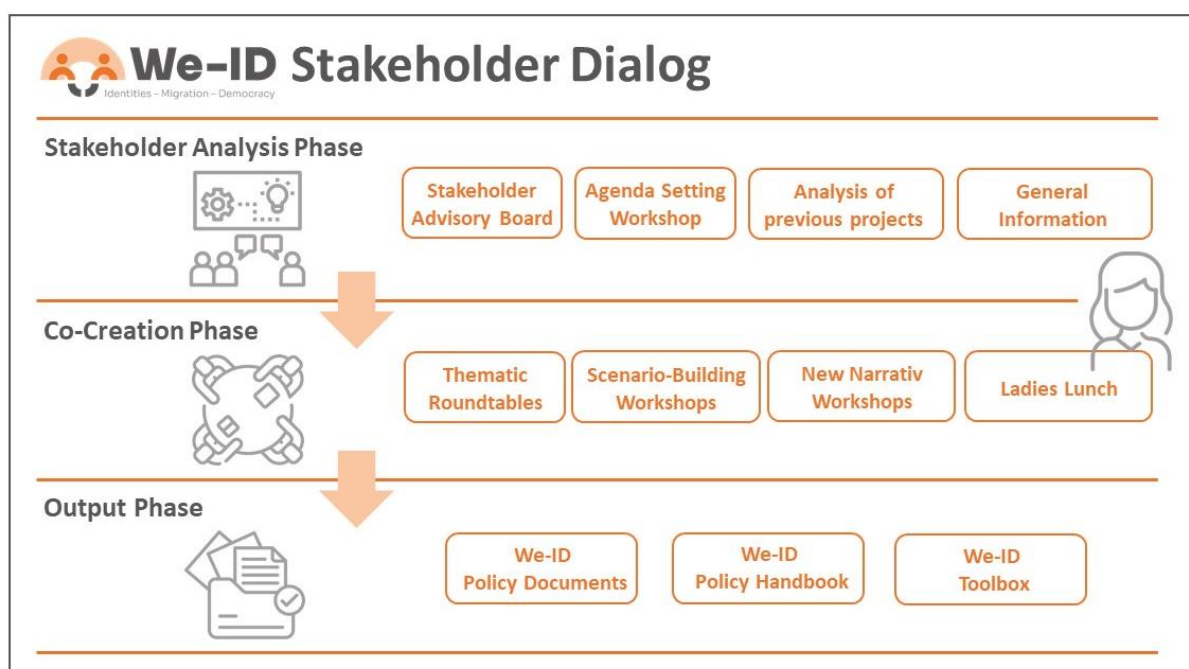


Figure 1. Three Phases of We-ID Stakeholder Dialogue

Source: Own Illustration; Icons: <https://www.flaticon.com/free-icons/>

The first **Analysis Phase** includes

- Stakeholder Advisory Board: Monitoring of the project and stakeholder engagement
- Agenda Setting Workshop Invitees: Early participation / transdisciplinary exchange [this is connected to the first two groups]
- Analysis of previous EU funded projects: Over 500 stakeholders
- General information (We-PARL activities, Digests)

The following components are planned for the second phase, the **Co-Creation Phase**

- Thematic roundtables: Identification of challenges and discussing approaches
- Scenario-building workshops: Co-design of strategies for advocacy and policy
- New Narrative Workshops: Co-design of strategies for advocacy and policy
- Ladies Lunch: Co-design of strategies for advocacy and policy

The **Output Phase** delivers as follows

- Policy documents for over 500 stakeholder



- We-ID Policy Handbook for policy experts
- We-ID Toolbox for civil society and professionals

Through this stakeholder process is intended to ensure the best possible influence of stakeholders.

## 7. First Results Thematic Stakeholder Dialogue

The results of the first stakeholder engagement meeting can be summarized under three thematic titles:

### **Migration, Identities, and Perceptions**

Local cultural and regional contexts strongly shape how migration is perceived. Tensions often arise between local, national, and EU-level migration policy frameworks, which can complicate implementation on the ground. In addition, historical memories and interpretations of wars in neighboring countries – especially in border regions and among different ethnic groups – do not always align. Current conflicts, such as those in Ukraine or the Middle East, further polarize both host and migrant communities.

Media, and in particular social media, plays a central role in this dynamic by spreading disinformation and fueling polarization. The meeting participants emphasized the urgency of addressing binary, black-and-white thinking and conspiracy narratives. Populist framings of migration as a “threat” exploit fears of the foreign “other,” frequently relying on exaggerations, misinformation, and oversimplifications.

### **Fairness, Trust in Institutions, and Participation**

Unequal treatment of migrants based on country of origin or skill level often creates feelings of injustice and exclusion. These perceptions are compounded by a broader erosion of trust in political institutions, especially among younger people, who also experience the uncertainty generated by constant political changes.

Migrants’ limited access to democratic participation is both a cause and consequence of exclusion. Workplaces can serve as important spaces to learn and practice democracy – “democracy begins on the shop floor” – but such opportunities are undermined when funding for essential integration measures, such as language courses, is cut. Moreover, host countries frequently fail to attract or retain skilled migrants due to misaligned policies and bureaucratic hurdles. Municipalities and states often operate on the assumption of an “ideal migrant” who integrates easily and willingly into their workplace and community. At the same time, national interests regularly block efforts to improve coordination at the EU level.

### **Regional and Generational Factors**

Spatial divides are another key dimension: rural regions often feel “left behind” compared to urban areas, while intra-urban segregation reinforces divisions within cities. These dynamics make certain areas particularly vulnerable to disruptive and populist politics. At the same time, culture and the creative industries have emerged as crucial tools for fostering social cohesion and promoting more inclusive narratives.

Despite these opportunities, a broader integrative narrative of belonging and solidarity is still missing. Youth, who are traditionally seen as more open and progressive, are increasingly influenced by populist framings of migration. Understanding these shifting attitudes and the active role of young people in democratic life will be essential for building inclusive and resilient societies.

From these initial results, the following **thematic agendas for WE-ID** can be derived:

- **Integration Through Belonging**  
Advance research and practice that go beyond policy instruments to include narratives of belonging. Particular attention should be given to how both migrant and host communities experience and articulate belonging, and how these dynamics may contribute to strengthening a shared European identity.
- **Workplaces as Democratic Arenas**  
Position workplaces as key sites for civic participation, identity formation, and rights education, thereby linking economic integration with democratic empowerment.
- **Disinformation and Democratic Resilience**  
Address the challenges posed by disinformation to democratic systems, with a focus on vulnerable regions. This requires evidence-based strategies to counteract its influence while maintaining the integrity of open societies.
- **Context-Sensitive Policy Design**  
Adapt integration and participation policies to diverse territorial realities — urban, suburban, and rural — acknowledging that uniform approaches are insufficient.
- **Youth Perspectives and Emerging Exclusions**  
Investigate how younger generations perceive migration, democracy, and populism, while also identifying new forms of exclusion that may shape their attitudes and civic engagement.
- **Country-of-Origin Dynamics**  
Examine the continuing role of migrants' countries of origin in shaping identity, belonging, and political engagement within host societies, and integrate these insights into policy frameworks.

In addition, after the first stakeholder event, **strategic politics and advocacy priorities** could already be defined as follows:

1. **Employment as a Vehicle for Empowerment:** Leverage the workplace as a critical arena for fostering democratic competencies and advancing the inclusion of migrants into economic and civic life.
2. **Constructing Inclusive Narratives:** Support the development of Pan-European narratives of belonging that transcend narrow integration benchmarks and promote a shared sense of community.
3. **Proactive Media Strategies:** Invest in anticipatory communication approaches, including the creation of counter-narratives through social and local media platforms, to strengthen social cohesion and resilience.
4. **Enhancing Participatory Governance:** Move beyond top-down policy models toward inclusive, participatory mechanisms that enable migrants and local communities to actively shape decision-making processes.
5. **Addressing Rural Integration Gaps:** Prioritize targeted integration policies in rural, depopulated, and politically marginalized regions to ensure territorial cohesion and equal access to opportunities.
6. **Mainstreaming Gender Sensitivity:** Incorporate gender-responsive measures into migration and integration frameworks, with particular attention to the labor, housing, and civic participation challenges faced by migrant women.

7. **Strengthening Multi-Level Coordination:** Enhance cooperation and coherence between EU institutions and member states to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of migration governance.

## 8. Support with quantitative Data

The strategic politics and advocacy priorities in chapter 7 marked in bold can already be supported by initial results of the quantitative WP4:

### 8.1 Gender-sensitive integration: Address the specific experiences of migrant women in labour, housing, and civic life

Most Western, Northern and Southern European countries have experienced positive net migration and population growth due to migration over the past three decades. Although migration has not offset population ageing, it has kept European populations from declining, and most importantly the size of its labour force stable.

People come to Europe to study, work and for family reasons. Significant numbers of migrants come with families. The analysis of the employment patterns of family migrants shows that only one partner works (usually the man), while the other (usually the woman) stays at home (Figure 1). Sometimes this may be to do with preferences, but most often the reason is the lack of opportunities for partners: no right to work, the lack of access to state-subsidised childcare or relevant information, and of course, the need to reorient in a new society, which requires training. Briefly, a challenge to European societies is of how to better use the skills of women who arrive as dependants. The importance of labour market participation is a key for successful immigrant integration and enhancing a sense of belonging.

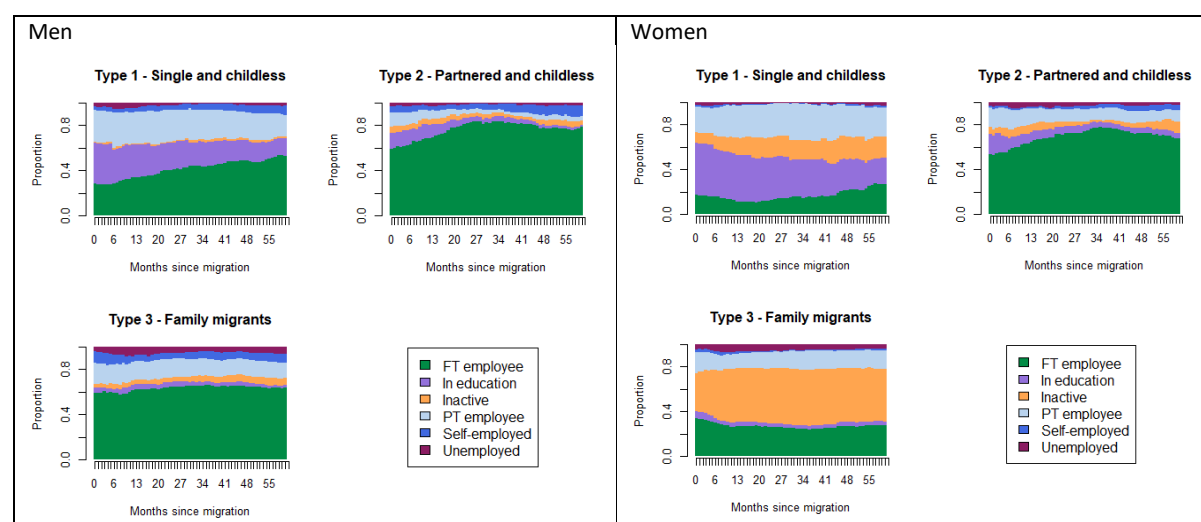


Figure 2. Immigrant groups in the UK by employment status and gender.

Source: Mikolaj, J., Kulu, H. 2025. *The partnership, fertility, and employment trajectories of immigrants in the United Kingdom: an intersectional life course approach using three-channel sequence analysis.* *Demographic Research* 53, 261-306.

### Recommendations

With a significant proportion of female family migrants inactive there is an opportunity and need to help increase employment among partners of (skilled) immigrants. This could include: a) providing better information for family members prior to their arrival regarding employment and childcare opportunities; b) supporting family members to find suitable employment for their qualifications; c)



providing accessible language and training courses, but also promoting skills and qualification recognition; and d) facilitating access to childcare services available in the area. The socioeconomic benefits could be significant.

## 8.2 Target Rural Areas: Strengthen integrative efforts in depopulated or politically neglected regions

Much of academic and policy literature focuses on understanding migration patterns of young adults in rural areas and the reasons for their out-migration. Research shows that most people, especially young women leave rural areas for study or employment opportunities in cities. Policy recommendations either focus on possible ways of the retention of those who look for employment or the attraction of people from rural areas when they have completed their education in urban centres. Governments have also considered attracting immigrants to smaller places – small towns and rural areas – to address the issues of population ageing and depopulation and to keep these places alive. However, this has never been successful. Trying to keep people who are in their early twenties in smaller places, when they wish to study and start their work life, has not worked, independent of whether they are immigrants or the native-born people.

Recent research from the UK shows that a significant number of people in their late twenties or thirties move to rural and remote areas (e.g. Scottish Highlands and Islands). Some of them return to rural areas after studies in cities and employment elsewhere, others are newcomers (EAG 2025). Some people move to rural areas with children, others intend to form a family soon. In both cases, these individuals plan to raise their children in family friendly environment with nature, clean air and a higher quality of life. In some remote areas in the UK, the inflow of family migrants exceeds the outflow of young adults (EAG 2025). International migration, if carefully managed, may also help address the issues of rapid population ageing and depopulation in rural and remote areas. It is possible to attract people who are already in family ages, such as family migrants, to smaller communities. However, to make this successful, it requires a joint effort by local businesses and communities to help find employment to both partners and help with childcare.

*EAG 2025. Expert Advisory Group on Migration and Population. Rural Scotland - trajectories of young people and young adults: report. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/migration-mobilities-trajectories-young-people-young-adults-rural-scotland/>*

## 8.3 Narrative Building: Develop inclusive, Pan-European narratives of belonging, beyond integration checklists

In all European countries, satisfaction with the government has declined in recent decades, which poses a challenge to Western democracies. The analysis shows that the share of people satisfied with country's democracies varies across European countries, e.g. being higher in Sweden and Germany and lower in the UK, France and Spain (Figure 2). There are important differences between population groups. The satisfaction with democracy is significantly higher among immigrants than the native population including descendants of immigrants. The results are very similar in trust in a country's parliament with immigrants expressing higher trust than the native population, although the trust in (the current) parliament is lower than the satisfaction with democracy, as expected.

However, immigrants' higher satisfaction with democracy and trust in government do not translate into their voting behaviour. The results show that immigrants (i.e. those who have the right to vote)

have lower voter turnout than the native population. This could be for a number of reasons such as difficulties in navigating the new system, the intention to leave the country or the feeling that they should leave voting to people who are more knowledgeable about the country's affairs. However, it could also be explained by a possible discrepancy between migrants' faith in their new country and between the harsh realities and discrimination that they face. This is certainly an area where policies could help promote migrant integration and a common sense of belonging given that most migrants have high willingness to integrate expressed by their faith in their new country.



Figure 3. The percentage of satisfied with democracy, expressing trust in parliament and those who voted in last elections in selected European countries, 2002-2023.

*Note: the percentages are age and period adjusted*

*Source: European Social Survey, waves 2 to 11.*

## 9. Recommendations on European Migration and Integration Policy

The aim of deliverable 2.1 is to provide first recommendations for migration and in particular integration policy at EU and national level. Literature research, the results of the first thematic stakeholder dialogue and quantitative evaluations, have led us to the following initial, cautious recommendations, which will now be supplemented and reinforced as the project progresses.



Looking ahead, European migration and integration policy can move beyond narrow management of flows toward a comprehensive strategy of **belonging, participation, and resilience**. The stakeholder dialogue of WE-ID shows that the Commission can anchor integration not only in economic performance indicators but also in local cultures, democratic vitality, and civic trust. This means

shifting from fragmented, top-down approaches to participatory, place-sensitive strategies that empower municipalities, civil society, and workplaces as key sites of inclusion. **Participation of migrants in policy design** (co-production) can shift the focus from individual adaptation to shared responsibility and rights-based integration. Mistrust can be bridged and belonging can be fostered if the voices of migrants are not only heard but also influence decisions.



**Narratives of solidarity and belonging** — already shown to unlock rapid consensus in cases like Ukraine — should be systematically cultivated, replacing reactive crisis framing with proactive communication strategies that engage local communities, counter disinformation, and strengthen democratic resilience. An inclusive framing of integration policies (as two-way, intercultural processes) can promote awareness and challenge dominant assimilationist narratives. Recognition of racialised mechanisms in citizenship and language policies can stimulate more equitable policy design and public debate. Political communication and awareness campaigns must challenge conditionality narratives and shift public attention to the structural barriers faced by migrants, e.g. housing, health, language access. Finally, consistent monitoring and evaluation of integration measures, especially those tied to funding, can help ensure they promote cohesion rather than entrench exclusion.



At the same time, **labour markets and bureaucratic systems** must be aligned with integration goals. Europe's ability to attract and retain skilled migrants remains undermined by excessive red tape, unequal treatment by origin or skill level, and slow recognition of qualifications. Future frameworks should treat workplaces as arenas of democratic education and social cohesion, with **stronger protections for vulnerable groups**. **Migrant women** in particular often face additional barriers — limited access to gender-sensitive services (health, language), family roles, cultural stigma and structural discrimination (e.g. language tests, bureaucratic hurdles). Low-income migrants and those in rural areas are facing added isolation, fewer services, and greater stigmatization, especially in housing and healthcare. Anti-discrimination policies with human-rights based approaches are needed. Investing in inclusive labour practices is not only an economic necessity but also a civic one — where democracy can “begin on the shop floor.” Integration policies must also reach rural and depopulating regions, where feelings of neglect fuel polarisation and populism. Supporting civic spaces, local culture, and creative industries in these areas can help counteract exclusionary narratives and revitalise democratic participation. Measures must be tailored to actual needs and well implemented at the district or municipal level. Access points such as migration offices or language schools must act as facilitators and be equipped with cultural competence, translation services, and empowerment practices to build trust and promote meaningful participation.



Finally, the EU must strengthen its multi-level governance architecture: aligning national interests with EU-wide coordination, ensuring resources reach the local level, and institutionalising foresight to anticipate uncertainty in migration trends. Policies should be designed with flexibility, transparency, and ethical safeguards, acknowledging that migration flows cannot be predicted or controlled with precision. Instead, **Europe should build resilience: through gender-sensitive integration, bottom-up participation, and narrative strategies** that highlight migrants' contributions and shared values.

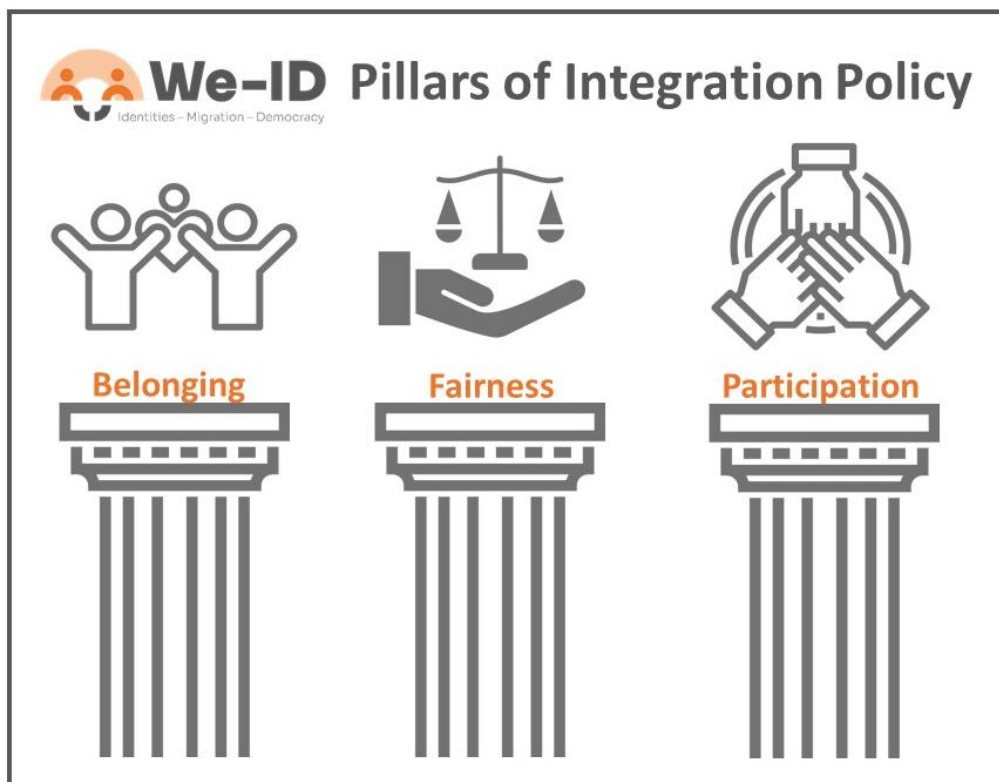


Figure 4. Pillars of Integration Policy

Source: Own Illustration; Icons: <https://www.flaticon.com/free-icons/>

A future-oriented migration and integration policy must therefore rest on **three pillars — belonging, fairness, and democratic participation** — ensuring that Europe's response to migration strengthens, rather than undermines, its democratic and social foundations. Our research and stakeholder dialogue activities will cover and discuss these thematically in coming project years.