

# 7 | ESTONIA AND THE 2015 REFUGEE CRISIS: BUILDING PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR THE ADMISSION AND INTEGRATION OF REFUGEES

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The last couple of years have globally witnessed the biggest refugee crisis since the world wars in the 20th century. By 2017 more than five million people had fled to Europe, mostly from war-torn Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq (USA for UNHCR). The European Union (EU) or individual member states were not ready for a refugee crisis of this scale nor were they able to see the forthcoming consequences. It has been argued that the crisis is not only about migration but about the inability of the European asylum system which is mainly caused by internal contradictions and different national interests of the member states (Bagdonas 2015:7-8). The 28-nation EU shares blame for this situation because it has failed to develop a fair migrant admission and distribution plan for member states (Traar 2018).

In 2015 the European Commission presented a comprehensive European Agenda on Migration to tackle the main challenges of the ongoing refugee crisis. An “emergency relocation system” was established using both internal and external policies for common policy goals for the member states, including setting up a compulsory refugee reception quota system (European Commission, homepage). This controversial approach created a lot of tension and fear within and between different European states, Estonia not being an exception. This turmoil has set up anti-immigrant movements and also boosted the popularity of far-right political parties which are using the refugee crisis to seize power through intimidation and manipulation.

In this paper, integration will be defined as “the increasing of cultural, political and socio-economic coherence of society” (Integrating Estonia 2020:3) bearing in mind that integration is complex and “polarised” by nature because it is trying to join antagonistic processes – increase social coherence and at the same time maintain individual differences. Integration in this context must be seen as a two-way street where not just the newcomers must adapt but the population of the countries of destination must also contribute to the processes. Otherwise, the newcomers may segregate and this can lead to dangerous radicalisation which has already been witnessed in some parts of Europe in recent years.

The main aim of this paper is to provide an overview of the Estonian experience with the refugee crises on a practical level – it will map out the main challenges and also possible good practices. The first section of this paper provides a brief description of the ongoing refugee crisis. The following section gives an overview of the Estonian integration and migration system, specifically focusing on the integration of refugees who came under the EU migration plan. The final section contains an analysis and discussion, bringing together research results and interview data. The analysis and discussion section is followed by a conclusion and suggestions.

## **ESTONIA AND THE 2015 REFUGEE CRISIS**

### **Integration and Migration Policy of Estonia**

In 2015 there were approximately 192,900 people living in Estonia who were born outside the country, making it 14.7% of the total population (approximately 1.3 million people in total). Around 13,000 of them were from another EU country and 179,600 from outside the EU (Human Rights Centre, homepage). The biggest minority group in Estonia are the Estonian Russians who make up approximately 24% of the total population. Other bigger national minorities are Ukrainians, Byelorussians and Finns. Around 80,000 people living in Estonia have undetermined citizenship (a special legal status in Estonia that is not citizenship but is not statelessness either).

Official integration policy in Estonia supports the idea of a multicultural society. According to the Constitution of the Republic of Estonia, everyone must guarantee the preservation of the Estonian people, the Estonian language and the Estonian culture but at the same time, everyone has the right to preserve his or her ethnic identity (Constitution of the Republic of Estonia). In order to achieve a functioning multicultural society, one of the preconditions additionally to identity is mutual recognition and tolerance which is lacking in the case of Estonia (Institute of Baltic Studies 2012:44).

According to the development plan Integrating Estonia 2020, Estonia is currently facing three crucial challenges in the field of integration in order to achieve a socially cohesive Estonian society (Integrating Estonia 2020:4):

- *increasing the openness of society, including Estonian-speaking permanent residents and making their attitudes towards integration more supportive;*
- *the continuing support for permanent residents with cultures and native languages different from Estonian in the society;*
- *supporting the adaptation and integration of new arrivals as a growing target group.*

Estonian migration policy has been stable but rather conservative since the country's restoration of independence in 1991. This does not come as surprising that Estonians also support a conservative asylum policy; for example, 47% of people are opposed to the idea that Estonia should be lenient when examining applications for international protection (Eesti elanikkonna hoiakud kolmandatest riikidest sisserändajate suhtes Euroopa Sotsiaaluuringu andmetes 2016:28). Due to the conservative nature of the migration policy, obtaining citizenship for a foreigner is a complex task. Naturalisation is an option but it is considered to be one of the most restrictive in Europe (Trimbach 2017).

Estonia is one of the 146 states which has ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol (Integration of refugees in Estonia Participation and Empowerment 2016:10). According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), in

recent decades Estonia has been among the European countries which receives the least asylum seekers. From 1997 to the first half of 2015, a total of 709 asylum applications were submitted of which only 114 received international protection, mainly from the Russian Federation, Georgia, Ukraine, Syria and Afghanistan (International Organization for Migration, homepage). In 2015, with the European Agenda on Migration, Estonia agreed to provide asylum to 550 people within the following two years which is five times more than in the past 18 years altogether.

### **Estonia and the Refugee Quota System**

The EU migration plan saw 160,000 refugees resettled or relocated within the EU in 2016-2017. The figure or the “quota” comes mainly from the Act on Granting International Protection to Aliens which established the obligations of states to people who have requested or have already been granted international protection (Report of the National Audit Office to the Riigikogu 2016:3). The Estonian official position declared not to dispute the relocation quota and highlighted the need to help refugees integrate into Estonian society (Republic of Estonia Government, homepage).

In 2015 Estonia agreed to resettle and relocate up to 550 quota refugees under the EU migration plan. Within the first phase, Estonia agreed to relocate 329 refugees from Greece and Italy. Furthermore, Estonia agreed to resettle 20 refugees from Turkey and additionally resettle 168 people under the EU-Turkey Refugee Agreement. In total, Estonia was set to accept 517 refugees (Ülevaade riigi ja kohaliku omavalitsuse 2016. aasta tegevustest Euroopa rändekava alusel ümberpaigutatud ja -asustatud rahvusvahelise kaitse saajate vastuvõtmiseks 2016:1).

Before the global crisis, the challenge to integrate refugees was not considered problematic in Estonia as there were not too many asylum cases. The system was seen as quite adaptable in the sense that each case could be handled individually on a case-by-case method (Integration of refugees in Estonia Participation and Empowerment, 2016:9). Taking the obligation to relocate and resettle more than 500 refugees within two years meant that a more comprehensive mechanism was needed.

The Ministry of the Interior together with other stakeholders put together a profile of preference; for example, families with children, single parents, unaccompanied minors or orphans and persons who have given their consent to relocation to Estonia. Preferred were people who are more likely to adapt and integrate more easily and who are not considered a security threat/risk. Education and former work experience were also considered (occupation, skills, etc.). The candidates received an introductory-session on the Republic of Estonia. After the UNHCR had made an initial selection, Estonia would make the final decision to grant a person or family international protection (Täpsustatud tegevuskava Euroopa Liidu ümberasustamise ja ümberpaigutamise tegevuste elluviimiseks, 2015:6).

Refugees arriving in Estonia already had international protection granted and they also received a residence permit. They underwent a primary medical examination to detect any possible infectious or chronic diseases (Täpsustatud tegevuskava Euroopa Liidu ümberasustamise ja ümberpaigutamise tegevuste elluviimiseks, 2015:7-8). However, the initial medical evaluation does not cover mental health issues (Janson 2017). They were provided with accommodation (up to two years) and different support services such as, for example, free compulsory language training, translation service, support person service, etc. The aim of all these activities was to get the newcomers to access the labour market as promptly as possible to avoid exhausting the social system (Republic of Estonia Government).

By the beginning of 2018, under the EU migration plan, Estonia had relocated and resettled 206 refugees originally from Syria, Iraq and Yemen. The majority of them, 141 arrived from camps in Greece, 59 from Turkey and six from Italy.

### **MIPEX & Push-Pull Factors**

According to Migrant Integration Policy Index 2015 (MIPEX), Estonia was classified as a halfway favourable country for migrants, being ranked 22 out of 38 countries, which is several ranks ahead of other Baltic states. There are clear strengths and weaknesses in the system for the immigrants in Estonia to fully participate in different areas of public life (MIPEX 2015, homepage). On

the positive side, employment and education policies can be seen as an example because they try to respond to the needs of different groups of immigrants (both newcomers and long-settled non-EU-born groups). On the negative side, political participation, discrimination and more restrictive opportunities than in nearly all developed democracies to become a citizen of Estonia can be observed. There is a challenge of how to create inclusive conditions for all residents to participate, contribute and interact with each other in democratic life (MIPEX 2015).

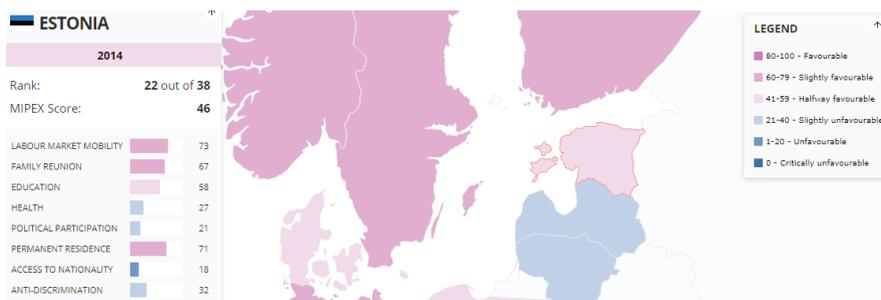


Figure 1. Migrant Integration Policy Index 2015 (MIPEX 2015).

With the current refugee crisis, it is easy to define the push factors, the factors that have forced people to flee their countries of origin – namely the Syrian war and other conflicts in the region, together with persecution and socio-economic difficulties. It is somewhat more difficult to define the pull factors, the factors which attract refugees to come to Estonia as their new country. Possible pull factors which attract refugees to come (and stay) in Estonia:

- Refugees arriving in Estonia under the relocation and resettlement plan already have international protection and they are granted living permits.
- Free housing for up to two years. At first, the accommodation was already waiting for the refugees in local municipalities but this created different problems and since 2018 people with international protection can choose the municipality and the accommodation themselves with the help of their support person.

- Persons with international protection have the same rights to receive support from the government as any other Estonian resident: pension, family benefits, labour market services and unemployment benefits, social benefits and health services. Income support can be applied on the same basis as the rest of the permanent or temporary residents of Estonia. In 2018 the income support was EUR 130 per month for the first member of the family and underage children. The subsistence level for each next adult family member is EUR 104 per month (Republic of Estonia Government, homepage).
- Free of charge language training for refugees. Since 2016 learning the Estonian language is compulsory for persons with international protection. The main aim of compulsory language training is to support the quick adaptation of the new arrivals. This will also help the refugees to enter the labour market more efficiently. After the initial arrival, the refugees also receive translation service when needed.
- Refugees receive individual support and counselling. Relationships are established between the refugees and their support person, local authorities, medical and educational institutions. There is a special three-day welcoming course for the beneficiaries of international protection. The main aim of this course is to help the newcomers to adapt more easily by providing information about the society, contacts with the organisation of their everyday life, culture and working environment. The courses are in English, Russian and Arabic (there are special one-day courses in the Dari and Farsi languages) (Welcoming programme).
- Refugees have the right to work in Estonia and they are provided assistance in finding employment through the Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund (EUIF). All legal residents can access employment services and programmes, vocational education and training.
- Recognising refugee qualifications in Estonia. The procedure differs for the recognition of academic degrees and for foreign professional qualifications. The former is done by the Estonian ENIC/NARIC Centre in accordance with government regulation (RT I 2006, 16, 130). It is free of charge and will be issued to the applicant within 60 days. It is both

advisory and informative for an educational institution or an employer (The Estonian ENIC/NARIC). There are also some professions which require a special professional qualification in order to work in Estonia (education, law, health care, etc.). The recognition of foreign professional qualifications for refugees is regulated by the Recognition of Foreign Professional Qualifications Act (RT I 2008, 30, 191) but in order to receive the recognition a person must contact a specific institution/authority in their area of activity (Estonian ENIC/NARIC).

- Children are enrolled in kindergartens and schools in local municipalities. The education sector is increasingly capable with refugee children. In most of the cases, refugee children have adapted well in the education system.

## ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This section is important for the integrity of the work, bringing together the research results and linking them to analysis and discussion. This section is made up of different categories of topics discussed in interviews with representatives of the leading Estonian NGOs in the field (R – respondent).

### Challenges

Although according to the UNHCR global report, the Baltic states have improved their asylum frameworks, procedures, practice and reception arrangements mostly due to implementation of laws and persistent advocacy, there remain several obstacles to overcome (UNHCR Global Report 2017: Regional summaries Europe, 2017:116). R1 *“The system is altogether too technical and is mainly based on the provision of services. There is a lack of a ‘humane dimension.’ The public services (for refugees) in this context alone do not work... There should be a community-based approach... I mean yes, we need to have national strategies in place but*

*with the lack of actual support from the community, it does not work. On paper, their rights and services are guaranteed, but in reality, are hard to apply in real life situations.*” The criticism from the stakeholders is that they are just providing services instead of working towards actual integration (Integration of refugees in Estonia. Participation and Empowerment 2016:89).

There are currently many challenges in the Estonian asylum system. R1 “The Estonian asylum policy is located in a hub – *it is related to the work of the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Education and Research... There are a lot of stakeholders involved and this complicates things.*” R2 “*We have very good cooperation with the ministries involved but cooperation with several other stakeholders is complicated. Yes, the institutions send their representatives to the meetings, but in many cases, the person doesn’t really work with refugee cases or doesn’t seem to be very motivated to.*” There is not enough coordination between different stakeholders and the system is quite technical – the government sets policies and then the third sector will provide most of the services in cooperation with other institutions (e.g., EUIF, local authorities).

The stakeholders also agree that in many cases, the “quota refugees” are quite reluctant to any integration processes. R2 “*In my experience, the “quota refugees” are the most complicated target group of the refugees that come to Estonia. In many cases, they are quite demanding, disappointed and even reluctant to do anything... I think it has to do with the years they have spent in the camps, waiting, where they were just handed out everything... They are somehow so very excluded from real life... On the contrary, the refugees that arrive here voluntary and on their own, are enthusiastic and eager to adapt.*”

### **Direct Placement to Municipalities**

R1 “*Estonia was the first in the Baltics to start accommodating people with international protection straight to municipalities, to rented apartments. It was thought to increase integration more rapidly. The actual outcome was that there were several problems and it did not give any advantages in integration...*” At

first, the refugees were often accommodated in rural areas because of cheaper accommodation costs. This, on the other hand, made entering the labour market more difficult because labour market opportunities were limited (no jobs or only low-income jobs available).

In many cases, the local governments were not ready to receive refugee families and provide services to them. R1 *”Community in my experience is the keyword for a successful transition and adaptation. Most of the success stories are related to strong community support. Yes, other conditions play important roles, but communal support is definitely very important... but support from the communities comes when the communities are ready to provide the support. For example, when the refugee planes first arrived in Estonia, there were a few cases where the local governments learned about receiving a refugee family on the day or one day prior to their arrival. There was no preparation in many cases and it created a lot of tensions from the perspective of local municipalities. No experience or proper resources... This does not make any sense... they are supposed to provide services to them and support them...”* The system of direct placement to municipalities has since changed (2018), allowing the refugees to choose the municipality or city where they are going to live after initially living in refugee centres.

There is now a tendency where most of the refugees choose to live in bigger cities (Tallinn, Tartu, etc.) where it is easier to find employment and also simpler to “blend in.” R1 *“Many of the success stories come from bigger cities. It is also easier to provide specific services when the refugees are sort of concentrated together.”* This means that providing services to refugees additionally to the third sector is now mostly concentrated to a few local governments. R2 *“In Tallinn City Council there is not a specialised official to deal with refugee-related issues. We sometimes turn to them with some ideas or problems, but there is no one specific to turn to...”* R1 *“Tartu city council hired a special contact person, a coordinator to help the newcomers, but sadly, as the number of arrivals was so low, the position was later abolished.”*

## Secondary Migration

According to the Ministry of Social Affairs' statistics, at least 88 of the 206 "quota refugees" are currently not in Estonia any longer (ERR 2018). R1 *"In the (refugee) camps they live in inhumane conditions and getting them out of there is actually more like a humanitarian mission. But in the end after arriving here, with guaranteed sufficient living conditions, they feel so isolated and excluded particularly in rural areas."*

There are already numerous examples where people with international protection decide to leave Estonia. In most cases, they have travelled to Germany where benefits are higher and in most of the cases there are also acquaintances. People with international protection are allowed to travel with their permits but they are not allowed to stay away from Estonia over 90 days, otherwise they will be sent back to Estonia. R1 *"It is important to understand how they (the refugees) end up here in Estonia. In most of these cases it is so to speak forced migration... UNHCR makes the first selection in the refugee camps and then Estonia in accordance with their set measures makes the final decision. So, in a lot of the cases they (the refugees) formally choose Estonia, but at the same time have no other option. This may be one of the reasons why so many people leave. So that they actually do not intend to stay here in the first place... there have been cases where we know that people who have been granted international protection in Estonia, deliberately decide to lose their new documents so that they could start the process again in Germany – secondary migration."* There should be measures to support refugees' self-sustainability in order to reduce secondary migration from Estonia.

## Refugees and the Labour Market

Refugees have the right to work in Estonia and they are provided assistance in finding employment through the Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund (EUIF). The EUIF has various measures, it mediates job offers, provides job placement opportunities and advanced courses. "The measures are not diversified according to specific labour market groups but are offered according to the special circumstances, individual

needs and obstacles to entering the labour market of each person in every individual case” (Integration of Refugees in Estonia. Participation and Empowerment 2016:47). The EUIF also has support mechanisms for employers who hire refugees. R1 *“There are different programmes which encourage hiring refugees (e.g., “My first job” programme), but for some reason, this has not created an impact...”* According to MIPEX 2015 index, approximately 30% of working-age non-EU citizens in Estonia are not in employment, education or training (MIPEX 2015).

It is, however, crucial to understand that the situation of the demographics in Europe and more specifically in the Baltic states is alarming – the population is ageing and declining. According to the Estonian Institute of Economic Research, the current situation of the Estonian economy is strong but the main economic problem is labour shortage; more specifically, a lack of skilled labour. By 2025 it is estimated that there will be a shortage of 100,000 workers (Tamkivi 2016). That is why refugee integration should be seen as an interest of Estonia and other Baltic states. Instead of seeing refugees as a “threat” or “burden,” the focus should be on finding efficient and sustainable solutions to integrate the new arrivals into Estonian society and the labour market. There are, however, several bottlenecks to consider – educational background, professional background, ability to learn languages, etc. R1 *“Education is a big problem. More so the level of education... Educational level affects communication, dependence and also the level of demands from the refugees. It is also connected to the ability to learn languages and possible future participation in the labour market... It is important to understand that yes, learning Estonian is now compulsory for refugees, so when signing the documents to obtain the status of international protection they also agree to learn the Estonian language. In reality, there are no sanctions when they don't. It could, however, become an obstacle when extending one's residents permit...”*

There is a lack of individual “labour inclusion plans” which build on the refugee’s qualifications and aspirations (Integration of Refugees in Estonia. Participation and Empowerment 2016:11). These restrictions may create a situation where the refugees start working below their qualifications or quit looking for a job. According to MIPEX, this can create “long-term negative consequences for labour market integration” (MIPEX 2015).

### **Cultural & Religious Differences**

According to the UN, a third of all refugees around the world come from three nations: Syria, Afghanistan and Somalia (UNCHR 2014). This means that most of the refugees looking for international protection in Estonia are from remote countries with a different cultural and religious background. There is ethnic diversity in Estonia but only to some extent. Most of the diverse ethnic groups have lived here for a long time (Russian, Ukrainian, etc., minorities) and they are culturally much more similar to Estonians than the refugees from the Arab world. R1 *“The Arabs are very different from us; they are used to a different social system – there is a lot of hierarchy and customs. For example, they would only visit shops that are owned by their relatives, job opportunities through personal contacts, etc.”* R2 *“They are mostly from societies, where it is all male-driven – it is very surprising for them to see so many women everywhere in the society...nurses, shopkeepers, teachers, etc.”*

Estonians are known to be one of the least religious nations in the world, with Christianity being the most commonly practiced religion. The two largest Christian traditions in Estonia are Lutheran and Orthodox. There is only a small practicing Muslim community in Estonia, consisting of different ethnicities, mainly members of Tatar, Azerbaijani, Kazakh and Uzbek communities living in Estonia (Estonian Islamic Congregation, homepage).

### **Anti-migrant Attitudes, Discrimination and Stigmatisation**

According to MIPEx and several other statistics, anti-immigrant attitudes are higher than in most developed countries and around half of the population does not believe that Estonia is a welcoming country for immigrants (MIPEx 2015). Estonians are not a very welcoming nation; there is a problem with the openness of society. This has a lot to do with the cultural-historic background of Estonia and also the role of the media in recent years.

There has not been a “Willkommenskultur” in accepting refugees. According to the statistics, approximately 30% of Estonians would not let foreigners from poor

countries or outside European countries live in Estonia (Eesti elanikkonna hoiakud kolmandatest riikidest sisserändajate suhtes Euroopa Sotsiaaluuringu andmetes 2016:16). When speaking specifically about refugees, the statistics show an even bigger gap in tolerance. Accordingly, 42% of people are opposed to the idea of accepting refugees, 26% are neutral or do not have an opinion on this matter and 32% would accept refugees to Estonia (Pagulastega seotud hoiakud 2015).

Age is the main characteristic which determines the attitude towards newcomers. Young people (up to 30) are the most tolerant group and over 60-year-olds are the least tolerant group (Eesti elanikkonna hoiakud kolmandatest riikidest sisserändajate suhtes Euroopa Sotsiaaluuringu andmetes 2016:18). A positive or supportive attitude towards refugees and culturally different people is also characteristic to young people. The most conservative group towards refugees and asylum policy are people of an active working age (30-60-year-olds) (Eesti elanikkonna hoiakud kolmandatest riikidest sisserändajate suhtes Euroopa Sotsiaaluuringu andmetes 2016:35). People with a higher education also tend to be more supportive when it comes to immigration issues (Eesti elanikkonna hoiakud kolmandatest riikidest sisserändajate suhtes Euroopa Sotsiaaluuringu andmetes 2016:18). There is a slight positive change in the statistics when comparing older data with more recent.

According to the interviewees, refugees in Estonia experience slander and even physical abuse but often they do not tell this to anyone. R2 *“A lot of them don't speak up about the mistreatment and abuse they experience in our society. The ones that are more outspoken have told me stories about how they experience verbal-abuse, people spit at them... you get these sorts of people everywhere, but what saddens me the most is the fact that no one hardly ever steps up to protect them, if they witness any sort of cruelty...”*

Society's overall attitude, additionally to the historic-cultural tendencies, is shaped largely by the media. Since the outbreak of the refugee crisis, the media in Estonia has not been impartial. They have created a complex situation where terms such as asylum seekers and potential terrorist threats have been mixed up, thus creating a situation where distorted truths were spread. According to Bagdonas, the link between terrorism and irregular migration is the fact that one causes the other

(Bagdonas 2015:20). There is always coverage in the Estonian media when there are immigrants involved in a crime committed either in Sweden or Germany.

All of this has boosted the far-right movement because the refugee crisis is very much securitised and made into a topic of intimidation mostly for political gain. Since 2018 the public support for a national-conservative party, the Estonian Conservative People's Party (EKRE), has been at its highest ever (ERR 2018). In the 2019 parliament elections, EKRE received strong support from the nation (finishing third) and were chosen as a coalition partner in forming a government. The party leader will now be the Minister of the Interior with four more seats in the cabinet. It is currently unknown how much influence the national-conservative party will have on integration-migration policies or the overall attitudes towards it.

Why is the population's attitude important when it comes to migration? It has a big impact on newcomers' adaptability to adapt and integrate into the new society. Hostile attitudes support the situation where newcomers segregate and do not integrate with the rest of the society. Furthermore, this can lead to hostile attitudes towards the new country and create dangerous radicalisation. On the other hand, successfully integrated refugees can be seen as a resource in several ways, they are valuable in integrating other people from the same or similar ethnic groups and they could also help in shaping the overall attitudes towards immigration; more specifically, towards persons with international protection.

### **Good Practices**

The service of support persons has been widely used in Estonia. The support persons can be seen as a "bridge" between the technical system and the everyday lives of refugees. R1 *"The support person service is both a technical – providing services and moral – connection and communication between the refugee and society."* A more fixed time-frame for the support person service should be established as otherwise, it could create dependence and also learned helplessness. R1 *"The system of support person's service in Estonia is moving towards a specific timeframe at the beginning of the adaption process... I think this is more efficient, because we*

*have already seen in our work that sometimes the families have started to treat their support person as their spokespersons – so for example instead of sorting out some problems at their child’s kindergarten, they let the support person do it...this is not in the interest of their integration.”* A fixed time frame for the service means that there has to develop an existing support network instead. The stakeholders also see peer support/counselling as a good alternative to support persons.

Supportive work from the non-governmental sector and positive examples of supportive local communities can also be seen as good practices. For example, the Harju-Risti local community volunteered to offer to accept and accommodate a refugee family in 2016 (LP 2016). In 2018 the family was still living in the community and had adapted well, the father had successfully entered the labour market, whilst children were doing well at school. There are also a couple of good examples where refugees have started their businesses in the food sector (e.g., restaurant Ali Baba by Syrian and Palestine refugees).

Where else to look for “good practices?” On several issues, Finland could be seen as a “good example” for Estonia. Finland has decades of experience with refugee integration. R1 *“We only have two categories for literacy – a person is either literate or illiterate. In Finland, they have several sub-groups for each category, which helps a lot with further education and language studies.”* This could be supported by more functional language training which is adapted to the needs of the refugees in order to enter the labour market. R2 *“We have a lot to learn from the Scandinavian countries, but for example a big influence on our support service mechanisms comes from the Dutch model.”*

## **The Future**

Estonia should be accepting additional quota refugees within the framework of the European Commission proposal (ERR 2018). This means that in addition to the 206 people who had arrived by the beginning of 2018, a maximum of 80 people more should arrive. The stakeholders are very sceptical that any other quota refugees will come to Estonia. R2 *“Not many people want to come to Estonia. Even the ones who*

*have undergone the interviews at the camps and have given their consent to come; for some reason change their minds at the very last moment and never actually make it here... We have heard that many have now decided to stay in Turkey.”*

Additionally, at least 88 of these people who have arrived are not currently in Estonia anymore (the data is incomplete). The number of asylum seekers has decreased significantly after 2017 and this has created a standstill in the system. R2 *“The problem is that all the services for the refugees are in place, but there are currently not many people coming to Estonia. It is very hard to plan work when there are not enough people to provide the designed services.”* R1 *“Is it even reasonable to develop service provision if we get around ten people per year, or where should most of the funding go? The system is currently at a crossroads.”* One option would be to concentrate the funds and programmes towards these groups which actually stay in Estonia. Successfully integrated refugees can be seen as a resource in several means – participants in the labour market, valuable in integrating other people from same or similar ethnic groups and they could also help in shaping the overall attitudes towards immigration.

## CONCLUSION & SUGGESTIONS

By 2019, the number of new arrivals illegally crossing into Europe has decreased significantly. It is estimated that it has dropped by 92% since the peak of the crisis back in 2015 (Smith-Spark 2019). Nonetheless, the refugee crisis is still ongoing and will probably be for years. Meanwhile, the consequences have changed Europe for good as it is not just the question of how to “divide” the newcomers between the member states but how to make them part of the new societies.

The goal of granting international protection is finding durable solutions for the refugees and ultimately achieving legal, economic, civil and political integration in their new countries of arrival (Integration of Refugees in Estonia. Participation and Empowerment 2016:10). A smooth integration process is also important in order

for the newcomers to access the labour market as promptly as possible, that way avoiding straining the social system. Integration is a two-way process – the refugees have to adapt and start contributing but in order to achieve a socially cohesive society, the receiving society must also be willing to adapt and accept change, “integrate with the refugees.” Due to the multilateral nature of the integration processes, it is very hard to predict the course of the integration trajectory in different societies.

The main aim of this paper was to provide an overview of the Estonian experience with the refugee crisis on a practical level. It focused on the Estonian refugee integration practice, mapping out challenges, obstacles and also good practices. This paper argues that refugee integration should be seen as an interest of Estonia and other Baltic states. Instead of seeing refugees as a “threat” or “burden,” the focus should be on finding efficient and sustainable solutions to integrate the new arrivals into Estonian society and the labour market. Successfully integrated refugees can be seen as a resource in several ways – participants in the labour market, valuable in integrating other people from the same or similar ethnic groups and they could also help in shaping the overall attitudes towards immigration. The following suggestions can be made from the results of this paper:

- Develop better coordination between different stakeholders
- Support community-based approach
- Capacity building for local governments
- Refugees’ self-sustainability in the new society
- Access to the labour market as promptly as possible
- Create individual “labour inclusion plans”
- More functional language studies
- Concentrate more funds and additional programmes towards groups which actually stay in Estonia
- Increase the openness in the Estonian society

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