Urban Europe

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Published by Amsterdam University Press

Marini, Gioia, et al.
Urban Europe: Fifty Tales of the City.
Amsterdam University Press, 2016.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/66459.

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5. The city as integration mechanism?

Active, integrated migrants require an active government

Jeanine Klaver and Arend Odé

Cities have traditionally been important for the integration of migrants, for this is where migrants can find the most opportunities for schooling, employment and encounters with the society in which they have settled.

This important role played by cities in the newcomer’s acquisition of social standing is specified as the escalator effect: migrants arrive, work their way up and leave the place they first arrived once they have climbed a few steps up the social ladder.

According to this conception, migrants take advantage of the many opportunities the city has to offer and as a result are able to go about integrating themselves successfully into society. In practice, however, the integration process is trying. The experiences of Turkish and Moroccan labour migrants show that many of these migrants have remained stuck at the bottom end of the social ladder and that they were never able to embark on a successful process of social and economic integration. As a result, many of them never left the place in which they first arrived.

New EU migrants

The current inflow of Polish migrants to the Netherlands is already larger than the annual number of migrants from Turkey, Morocco and Suriname put together. These new EU migrants’ average duration of stay is lengthening, and more and more women and children from Central and Eastern Europe
are coming to the Netherlands. Initially, these migrant groups were seen as temporary transients – commonly referred to in EU jargon as mobile citizens rather than migrants – who return to their country of origin after a period of work, but this appears to be changing. The relevant question for us is whether migrants from Central and Eastern Europe can and will benefit from the urban escalator effect. This question will become all the more relevant as migration from this region increases in importance.

At first glance, there appears to be no need for concern with regard to these migrants’ ability to integrate. There is a strong work ethic among these newcomes, and the share of employed people especially within the Polish migrant community is very high. In addition, the share of those eligible for welfare among migrants from Central and Eastern Europe is very low – much lower than among non-Western migrants in the Netherlands. And migrants from the new EU Member States are generally highly educated. Many of them have an academic degree, which of course leads to far more opportunities in the Dutch labour market than the low-skilled guest workers of several decades ago.

However, the relatively favourable labour market position of these migrants does not always lead to a successful integration in social terms. Migrants from Central and Eastern Europe keep to themselves and do not get involved in what is happening in their local community. This lack of ambition to integrate is clear from their reluctance to register with the population register (even among those newcomers who remain in the Netherlands for a longer period), from their minimal use of local facilities, and from their low degree of organisation. There is also a persistent problem with the Dutch language. For example, four out of five Polish people have difficulty speaking Dutch even several years after having settled in the Netherlands.

Their interaction with Dutch society is also a sore point. Research has shown that, over time, the contact that Central and East European migrants have with native Dutch people tends to decline and that they feel less and less accepted by the Dutch. Half of the Poles and two-thirds of the Bulgarians who have
settled in the Netherlands in recent years say that their ethnic group often experiences discrimination. And the longer they remain in the Netherlands, the less welcoming they consider the Dutch to be. The frequent reports of fraud and nuisance caused by certain Central and East European migrants – who seem to be dictating this group’s image – is clearly partly responsible for this attitude.

The conclusion we can draw is that these groups benefit insufficiently from the urban escalator effect to be able to upgrade their status within society. In general, then, these migrants often find themselves living on the margins of urban society: often invisible or only noticed when acute problems arise. Moreover, these migrants are also economically vulnerable. Their relatively high level of education has not prevented many from losing their jobs in the recent economic crisis. As a result, dependence on unemployment benefits among Central and East European migrants has increased sharply in recent years.

An active local government

Local governments in particular should work actively to promote the integration of these migrants, as there are a number of urgent integration problems at the local level. Most cities in the Netherlands, however, pay little attention to this particular group. The Platform Integration and Society recently concluded that the vast majority of municipalities in the Netherlands do not conduct any kind of targeted policy for EU migrants, nor do they feel the need to have any formalised contact with these newcomers. Most municipalities do indicate that they are experiencing bottlenecks with respect to this group, but this generally does not seem to have led to any real policy. Only a few large municipalities in this country – especially the three main cities – are more active in this regard. They gather relevant information, carry out policies on different issues, and organise activities so that they come into contact with this target group.
There are a number of arguments for encouraging other large cities to take a more active approach. Such an approach would allow the widely heralded axiom of full and active citizenship to also apply to these migrants. This is especially true for newcomers from Central and East Europe who tend to quietly find their way around Dutch cities – so quietly, in fact, that municipalities hardly notice them. Below, we put forward three arguments in favour of a more active integration policy at the local level.

First, by engaging these newcomers, large cities will be more able to utilise their economic potential. There are many ways in which metropolises seek out promising inhabitants, but newcomers from Central and East Europe generally tend to be overlooked. The reason for this is not clear. As mentioned above, migrants in this group tend to be highly educated and very much geared towards the labour market – such as students from East Europe or well-qualified professionals in the health care industry or in business-related services. Nevertheless, very few of these migrants are involved in what is going on in their immediate vicinity. This can be changed by increasing the visibility of the local government, which would in turn prevent these newcomers from leaving the city.

Second, a more active policy would prevent large cities from losing their grip on this population group. The invisibility of these newcomers means that their various rights and obligations as city dwellers remain unknown to them. For cities, this means that they do not receive their share of municipal revenues from this group. It also means that municipalities belatedly hear about cases such as overcrowding and the illegal rental of rooms. Given that these newcomers are showing more signs of being (semi-) permanent residents and no longer mobile citizens, it is crucial that these migrants participate as fully fledged citizens. It is in the cities' own interest to become more involved with this group – to begin with by actively encouraging them to register in the local population register.

And finally, cities can facilitate these migrants' participation in society. Many migrants from Central and Eastern Europe are
struggling with a number of concrete issues to which government support can be the solution – for example, knowledge of the local labour market, insight into various local initiatives, knowledge of laws and regulations, and information on opportunities for education and language courses. The fact that these migrants are searching for an answer to these questions demonstrates that they do indeed long to be integrated into Dutch society. Local governments can support this by providing relevant information or by referring them to the proper organisation. After all, active citizenship thrives on a supportive government, not on a hands-off government.

Over the past year, the national government has initiated a pilot project – the Participation Statement – to encourage newcomers to become more involved with their local surroundings. Migrants from Central and Eastern Europe were explicitly a part of this pilot project. What is striking about reports surrounding this pilot is how important it is for migrants to be welcomed in a concrete context: this makes the environment in which they are supposed to integrate more tangible, and they understand what the municipality’s intentions are with them. Instead of a comprehensive policy directed at target groups, this pilot simply coordinates the transfer and exchange of information in which both migrants and local governments as well as various organisations play a part. In the light of the above-mentioned threats and opportunities, such an initiative on the part of the larger cities is a promising investment.

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Further reading
