

A Comparative Analysis on Migration and Integration Policies of Belgium and Switzerland

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The Refugee Crisis in Europe has been labeled as one of the worst humanitarian crisis in our time. Over 9 million Syrians have been forced to flee their homes since the outbreak of the civil war in March 2011, seeking shelter in neighboring countries or internally displaced within Syria (Syrianrefugees.eu). Many refugees are fleeing to neighboring Turkey, however, with overcrowded communities and cultural tension, many refugees have sought to resettle in Europe and hope for a better future. This paper will compare the policies of migration in Belgium which is part of the European Union (EU) and Switzerland, which is not part of the EU and how the policies affect migrants and refugees. In addition, the paper will examine the integration process of refugees in both of these countries and how the policies help assimilate refugees into local communities and civil society.

### **Switzerland**

To ease the burden of the number of refugees arriving into Greece and Germany, many Swiss politicians pressured the government to open the nation's door for those fleeing war. The Swiss government quickly decided to take in 50,000 refugees as a result of the urgency of the situation (SwissInfo.ch). As a result, some resistance ~~were~~ was met amongst these migrants from Swiss civil society. For instance, many of the refugees were sent to remote villages and separated from integrating to Swiss society. Many of the locals viewed asylum seekers with suspicion and with hostility which further dehumanized their worth and rights. The asylum seekers are segregated and according to Al-Jazeera, a Doha-based media network, many of these refugees are not allowed to enter parks and pools near the village of Zurich (Abu-Hayyeh, Murray, 2014). In addition, Switzerland is facing backlash over a law that allows officials to seize valuables from asylum seekers upon entering the country. The Swiss law allows officials to

seize cash and valuables above \$1,000, though refugees may receive their valuables back if they leave within 7 months of arriving (Reilly, 2016). According to the State Secretariat of Migration in Switzerland, employed asylum seekers will be required to pay a special charge for their residence further discriminating against them and failing to protect their rights. Although Switzerland hasn't accepted many asylum seekers, it has contributed monetarily to the humanitarian crisis. At the end of 2013, Switzerland had contributed about \$2,254,791 to the Inter-Agency Syria Regional Response Plan while Norway, also not part of the EU, contributed \$15,793, 594 to help aid the migrants. The Response Plan is an inclusive process that brings together NGO's and member states of the UN, humanitarian agencies and local partners to assist in the Syrian refugee crisis.

In Switzerland, the objective of the integration policy is to "live together peacefully and offer equal opportunities to all." However, the process of integrating migrants and refugees remains difficult and seems to be a challenge for Swiss officials. Interestingly, naturalization and becoming a citizen is a federal responsibility for many, but, unlike other countries, individual communities in Switzerland decide whether or not to approve a migrant's application. (Schindall, 2009). Many outlets have claimed that the Swiss people are too restrictive over refugees and where they belong. This further complicates a migrant's path to citizenship, allowing Swiss citizens the power to determine who is "ready" to be an official Swiss citizen and who is not. Also, refugees that are granted a temporary residency permit face the insecurity of potentially being deported back to Syria as a result of their temporary status. This further complicates the integration of refugees and adds more dilemma for those wishing to seek asylum and refuge in a safe country (SwissInfo.ch, 2015). Anja Klug, a top official from the UNHCR agency claims that

the Swiss government should grant Syrian refugees full refugee status rather than a temporary residency permit, which would further destabilize the crisis and cause more confusion.

However, with the rising number of migrants settling in Europe, Switzerland claims that it is committed to protecting refugees and vows to enhance their effectiveness of their foreign policy on migration. The Federal Council of Switzerland believes that the foreign policy on migration is to uphold a “whole of government” approach in which all agencies work together and undertake a comprehensive approach on migration (FDFA, 2013). Cooperation among the different agencies and stakeholders allow for more unity and better informed decisions for Switzerland, establishing migrant partnerships and regional dialogue that would aim to improve upon their foreign policy.

According to the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX), Switzerland ranks 21 out of 38 and has a MIPEX score of 49. A score of 41-59 means that the country is halfway favorable amongst migrants and still needs to be improved upon. MIPEX is an assessment tool and framework that measures how effective policies are to integrate migrants in EU member states. Policies that are measured are labor market mobility, education, health, political participation, access to nationality, family reunion, permanent residence and anti-discrimination. Health, labor market mobility and access to political participation are the strongest and most favorable policies amongst migrants in Switzerland. However, education and anti-discrimination policies are ranked as some of the lowest and most challenging in the country. In order to meet the needs of migrants, Switzerland will still need to reform their policies on anti-discrimination laws and further work on better integrating migrants in society. Switzerland still faces challenges on protecting asylum seekers and refugees and ways to combat human trafficking as well. Some

policy recommendations from the Swiss Forum for Migration and Population studies is to increase education and trainings for adults of all groups including migrants, support immigrants' political participation in civil society, and to increase services on transcultural competence. (MIPEX.eu). Although integration is an ongoing process, Swiss officials have provided courses to help migrants settle and integrate such as language courses, occupational programs, literacy courses, and networking opportunities to help attain a job. Having these services allows migrants for a quicker integration process and be more involved in local Swiss communities.

### **Belgium**

Belgium has served as the capital of the European Union since the 1950's and over the past decades has become a country of settlement for many different types of immigrants (Migrationpolicy.org). According to the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX), Belgians have maintained more favorable attitudes toward migrants than most other European countries. Foreigners arriving in Belgium have the right to apply for asylum and ask for protection from the Belgian authorities. However, asylum seekers must go through various steps of the asylum procedure and the Belgian government will assess if the foreigner meets the criteria of having a "refugee status" based on the 1951 Geneva Convention. According to the Geneva Convention, a refugee is considered as someone "who, owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it." The office of the

commissioner general for refugees and stateless persons examines the asylum applications and will determine their status. After recognizing the status of a refugee in Belgium, many are entitled to have unlimited residence in the country which is beneficial and would alleviate some of the migrant's stressors.

Belgium's labor, migration and asylum policy has been designed to meet immediate economic or humanitarian needs without a vision for long term sustainability. For many decades, the Belgian government has established citizenship and integration policies in a *laissez-faire* approach or to minimally intervene in these tasks (Petrovic, 2012). However, recently the government has begun to reform some of its policies to be more involved and include the asylum process and family reunification initiatives. In Belgium, a foreigner with an unlimited residence permit is entitled to rejoin their families and grant asylum without delay by their spouse or registered partner, the children (aged 18 and under) of the spouse or registered partner, disabled adult children that can't take care of themselves, and parents if the refugee is an unaccompanied minor (UNHCR, 2014). Thus, the family reunification policy remains a positive factor and benefit for migrants.

The integration policies in Belgium are structured into different levels; the federal level, community level and the regional level. In the federal level, two main agencies, the Impulse Fund for Migration Policy and Urban Policy, are used to help support integration. The Impulse Fund for Migration Policy aims to improve the migrant's population participation by funding public and private initiatives while the Urban Policy is aimed to support urban renovation in cities. At the local level, integration policies are measured through regional centers that work toward improving work, housing, health and social life for migrants. These regional centers work

with local associations to promote intercultural relations and development projects that would be beneficial to migrants. Through the numerous integration policies, Belgium is doing more in their efforts to promote effective integration and advocating for migrants to be part of Belgian's society (Mandin, 2014). Through resettlement of refugees, Belgium also ensures that an integrated international protection policy is achieved. Belgium offers protection to asylum seekers through the national asylum process or through the resettlement program (Fedasil, 2013). Cases for resettlement are first pre-selected through the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Afterwards the cases are resolved and handled toward various agencies such as the Commissioner General for Refugees and Stateless Persons (CGRS) and the Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers. After the refugees are cleared to settle, for the first phase, they are placed in Federal reception centers and provided access to basic social and medical services. After 6 to 7 weeks, refugees leave the centers and are settled in private housing. However, support from federal centers is continued by assisting with integration procedures and continued social assistance for a minimum of 12 months. The main goal is to help support the refugees function independently in Belgian society and be a part of the local communities (Fedasil, 2013). By offering many mainstream social services, Belgium is empowering refugees and allowing them to rebuild their lives.

One effective framework that can be used to compare Belgium and Switzerland's policies is the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX). Belgium ranks 7 out of 38 on the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX) with a score of 67. A score of 60-79 means that the country is slightly favorable amongst migrants while 80-100 means that the country is deemed favorable. Belgium ranks high in permanent residence, anti-discrimination and family reunion policies

which allows migrants to feel welcomed and supported. Policy recommendations by the University of Brussels is to increase vocational training and employment among low educated men and women, remedy education opportunities for socially disenfranchised students, and increase awareness of politicians to meet the specific needs of migrants. Although improvements can be made, overall, Belgium has favorable integration policies that help immigrants in basic education, health services, political participation and a path of permanent residency.

### **Short Term vs Long Term Strategies**

Currently, the European Agenda on Migration has outlined many facets that address the internal and external relations of the migration crisis. The external dimensions of the EU migration policy is focused on cooperation with third parties to address the root causes, and providing regularity of migrants coming into Europe that have no internal protection. Managing the migration is a top priority for the EU external relations. Core objectives of the new framework on migration involves short term and long term objectives. Short term objectives include saving lives in the Mediterranean Sea and helping migrants avoid embarking on dangerous journeys across the sea. Furthermore, additional short term operational actions include managing new goals of migration partnership and budget programs, ensuring that root causes are addressed along with illegal migration. Helping with the External Investment Plan Proposal would secure more aid and assist in humanitarian needs which would increase self-sufficiency for refugees and help protect them as well.

The new partnership framework on migration will in the long term contribute to stabilize and manage the arrival of migrants coming into Europe. Long term objectives address the root

causes of migration and provide sustainable integration by advancing their political, social and economic circumstances. In order to effectively deliver results, all parties of the European Union and the member states must work together to deliver optimal results and assistance (Europa.eu, 2016). Managing the migration crisis is a top priority for the EU and through improved cooperation and political commitments among the member states, a path toward stability can possibly be achieved.

### **Conclusion**

Although Switzerland and Belgium are two distinctive countries dealing with the refugee crisis, both handle the situation with their own successes and challenges. Switzerland, a nation that is not part of the EU takes on a more strict approach while Belgium, a key country that is part of the EU, are welcoming migrants based on their refugee status. In terms of integrating, Belgium favorably supports equal rights and opportunities for immigrants. Although Belgium's legislative activity on integration remains high and appealing, other sectors of their policies can still be improved upon such as their labor market mobility, health and increasing political participation amongst migrants. On the other hand, Switzerland is lagging behind to integrate migrants and remains slow in their approach to change or create new policies. However, Switzerland is still favorable for their efforts in the health sector and job market for migrants. While the migrant crisis is an overwhelming task to control, both of these countries are respected in their own way for the work they are doing to help with the crisis, which is often not visible in the media and the public.

As the policymakers are working for a better solution, it is evident that a more clearly cohesive policy needs to be utilized in order to regain control of the EU member states borders

that meet the needs of the migrants and addresses the long term effects as well. Many of the policies are addressing the symptoms of the crisis rather than the root causes of the crisis, failing to solve the real problem which is why these migrants are fleeing to Europe in the first place. Addressing the real problem in Syria should be a high priority for the international community and then just maybe, the flood of migrants can be stopped.

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