

Understanding public opinions towards integration

Where does Sweden stand?

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Despite the concerns of migrant-receiving countries about the economic and social impact of migration, public opinion on integration has been under-researched. Moreover, most studies on integration have been conducted in large cities, while little is known about how people in smaller towns understand and perceive integration. Based on a survey of public opinion on the integration of refugees, this policy brief compares perceptions in Sweden with those in Austria, Germany and Italy. It also reflects on the policy implications of the survey results for Sweden. The survey targeted non-European refugees and Ukrainians. The fieldwork was conducted in small and medium-sized towns as well as rural areas (hereafter referred to as smaller towns). The study also considered a small sample in large cities for comparison purposes.

People's attitudes towards migrants influence their views on the integration of migrants¹, and vice versa: perceptions of how well or poorly a particular migrant group is doing – and therefore the extent to which they are contributing to, or becoming a burden on, the economy and society as a whole – can also influence public opinion towards members of that group. For example, people who believe that most refugees are unemployed are more likely to have negative attitudes towards them. Increasing our

¹ See Drazanova et al. (2020).

understanding of public attitudes towards integration is therefore of paramount importance in promoting positive attitudes towards migrant groups and, ultimately, social cohesion.

The EU-funded project “Exploring the Integration of Post-2014 Migrants in Small and Medium-Sized Towns and Rural Areas from a Whole of Community Perspective” (Whole-COMM, 2020–2024) analyses integration dynamics of migrants who arrived in several European countries, including Sweden, and Canada after 2014 and settled in smaller towns². As part of Whole-COMM, a survey on public opinions on integration outcomes and policies was undertaken in the summer of 2023 among an equally distributed representative sample of 16,000 online panellists who were born or had been living in Austria, Germany, Italy or Sweden for ten years or more (henceforth, long-term residents). Out of that number, 12,000 respondents lived in smaller towns and 4,000 in larger cities- defined as municipalities with a population of at least 250,000 people. From the 4,000 responses received in Sweden, one quarter were collected in Stockholm, Gothenburg or Malmö, and the rest in smaller towns³.

Without defining the concept of integration, we asked respondents for their views on questions such as how well refugees from outside Europe and Ukraine are integrated in Sweden, who is responsible for integration and what is the relationship between them and newly arrived refugees. The main findings of the survey are summarised below⁴.

Public opinions towards integration in Sweden

Overall, the differences in public opinion about the integration of newly arrived refugees between smaller towns and larger cities in Sweden - as in the other three countries - were not as significant as expected. In general, people think that Ukrainians are doing better than non-European refugees; there are very few relationships between long-term residents and newly arrived refugees, regardless of their origin or municipality of residence; and people who share leisure activities with refugees tend to have a more positive opinion of their integration.

² For a more detailed description of the Whole-COMM approach to integration read Caponio and Pettrachin (2022).

³ Note that municipalities around the three main cities, that is, commuter towns were excluded from the analysis.

⁴ For a full comparative paper on Public Opinions and Policy Impact on Integration and Social Cohesion refer to Irastorza and Yavcan (2024).

Who is responsible for integration?

A key issue in public debates and policies on integration is the allocation of responsibility for the process. We asked respondents who is responsible for integration⁵ and offered three possible answers: (1) the refugees themselves, (2) the refugees and the relevant state institutions, or (3) the refugees, the relevant state institutions and the population in Sweden.

- We found no difference in opinion on this issue between people living in large cities and smaller towns in Sweden, while in the other three countries people living in smaller towns considered it to be the sole responsibility of the refugees. Given the longer history of integration programmes in Sweden, it is possible that the normative discourse on integration is more deeply rooted across the country than in Austria, Germany or Italy.
- Almost half of the respondents in Sweden (more than in other countries) believed that integration is a shared responsibility of refugees and state institutions.

Are refugees well integrated?

We also asked respondents to agree or disagree with the statements 'In Sweden, refugees from outside Europe are well integrated' and 'In Sweden, Ukrainian refugees are well integrated'.

- In Sweden, as in all other countries, the majority of respondents think that Ukrainians are well integrated. In contrast, when asked about refugees from outside Europe, only a minority think they are well integrated.
- Opinions on the integration of Ukrainians are particularly favourable in Sweden compared with the other countries, and opinions on the integration of refugees from outside Europe are also relatively more favourable compared with Austria and Germany, but not Italy.
- There are no notable differences in opinion between smaller towns and larger cities in Sweden⁶, as in the other study countries.

⁵ The actual formulation of the question was as follow: "People also have different understandings about integration and who is responsible for it. Which of the following statements is closest to your personal view?".

⁶ In the figures smaller towns are depicted as "SMSTRA": small and medium-size towns and rural areas.

Figure 1. Refugees from outside Europe are well integrated

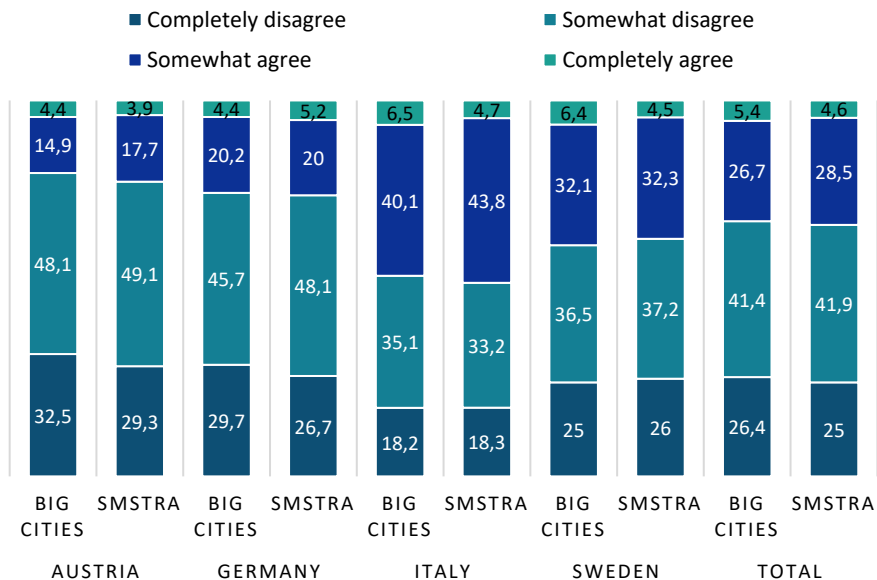
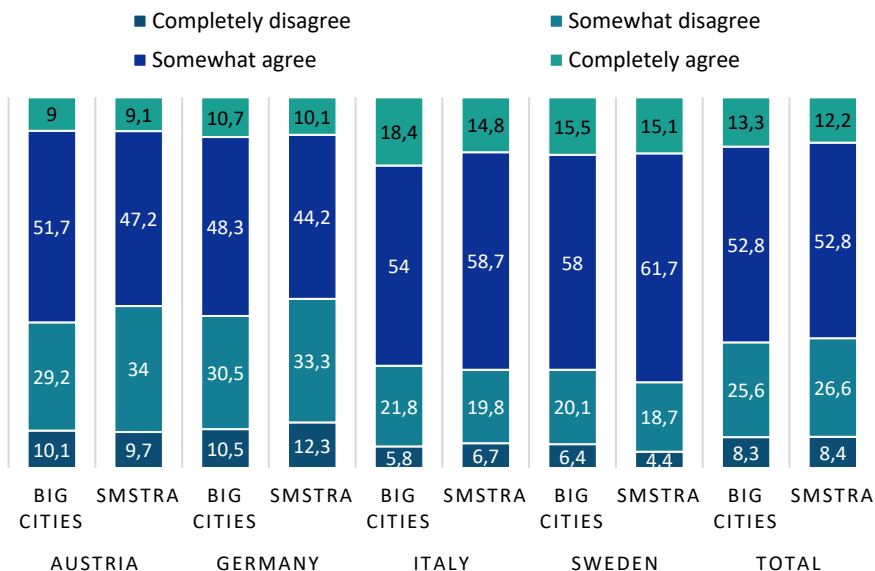


Figure 2. Ukrainian refugees are well integrated



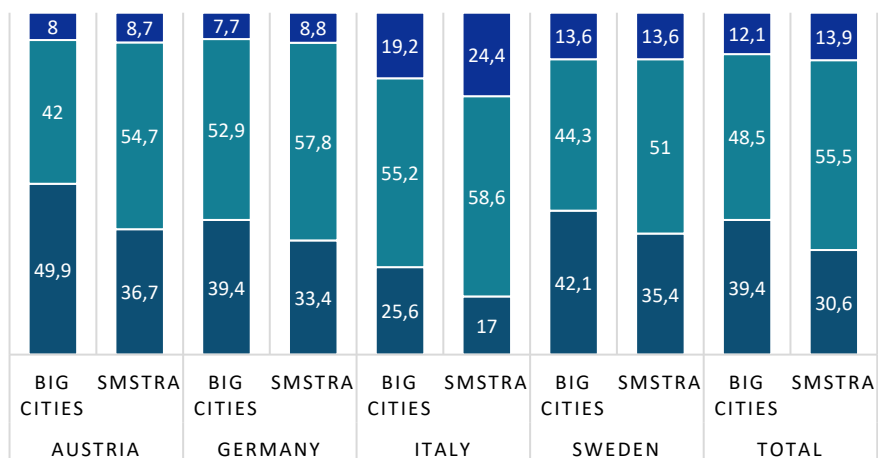
How are the relationships between refugees and long-term residents?

This question was also asked separately for refugees from outside Europe and for Ukrainian refugees. The three possible answers were: (1) relations are good, (2) there are almost no relations but people respect each other, or (3) there are tensions and hostilities.

- Half of the respondents in Sweden chose the second answer for both refugee groups. In the other three countries, the same proportion of respondents or more gave similar answers.
- In Sweden and Italy there are more people who think relations with Ukrainians are good and fewer who think there is tension and hostility than in Austria and Germany, where opinions are more negative.
- In all four countries, the most striking differences in public opinion relate to the origin of the refugees.

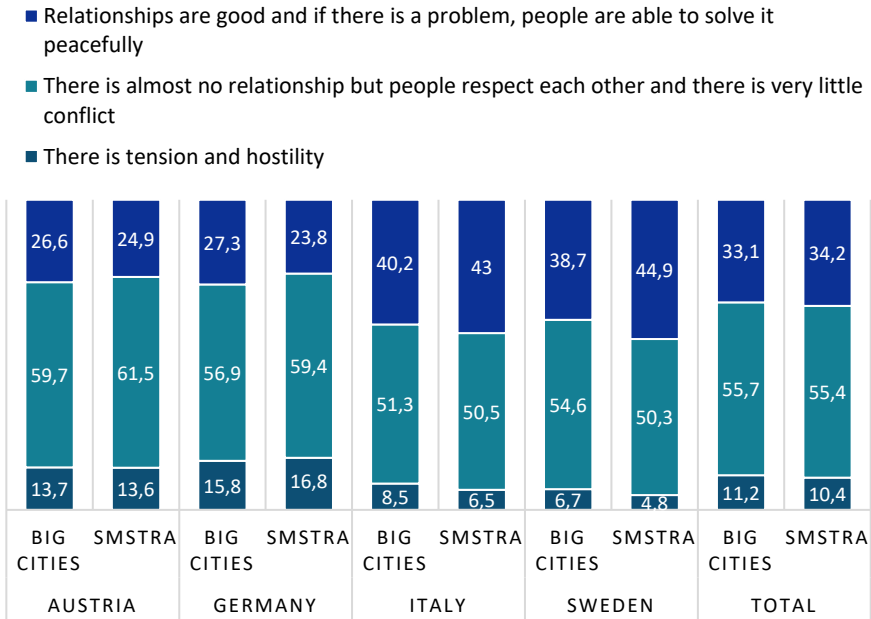
Figure 3. Relationships with refugees from outside Europe

- Relationships are good and if there is a problem, people are able to solve it peacefully
- There is almost no relationship but people respect each other and there is very little conflict
- There is tension and hostility



Opinions were generally more negative towards refugees from outside Europe. More than a third of respondents in Sweden, Austria and Germany think that relations between this group and long-term residents are hostile. Opinions are slightly more positive in Italy. Perceptions of tension and hostility in relations with refugees from outside Europe are higher in large cities than in smaller towns. However, differences in opinions about relations with Ukrainians according to the size of the municipality are not remarkable. This applies not only to Sweden, but also to all the other countries included in the study.

Figure 4. Relationships with Ukrainian refugees



This picture could be better understood with the help of qualitative data. As part of the Whole-COMM project, in-depth interviews were also conducted with various actors involved in integration and with refugees themselves. Refugees interviewed in Sweden felt that they were treated with indifference by the local population. They felt that local people avoided getting personal and building close relationships with them. These findings are reported by Måns Lundstedt in the DELMI Policy Brief (Delmi 2024:10).

What is the role of integration policies?

We asked respondents to agree or disagree with the following statements: “Policies should give full support to Ukrainian refugees” and “Policies should give full support to refugees from outside Europe”.

- The differences in opinion between non-European refugees and Ukrainians in Sweden – and all other countries – are confirmed: respondents in all four countries are more likely to think that policies should fully support refugees from Ukraine than refugees from outside Europe. The difference is particularly large in Sweden and Austria.
- Nevertheless, more than half of respondents in Sweden agree that policies should fully support refugees from outside Europe. Similar answers were given in Austria and Germany, while there was slightly more support in Italy.
- On the contrary, respondents in Sweden are more supportive of policy support for Ukrainians than in the other three countries.
- Differences in opinion by size of municipality are not remarkable in Sweden or Italy. In Austria and Germany, respondents in smaller towns are less positive about policies providing full support for refugees, with this difference being greater for refugees from outside Europe.

Figure 5. Policies should provide full support to the refugees from outside Europe

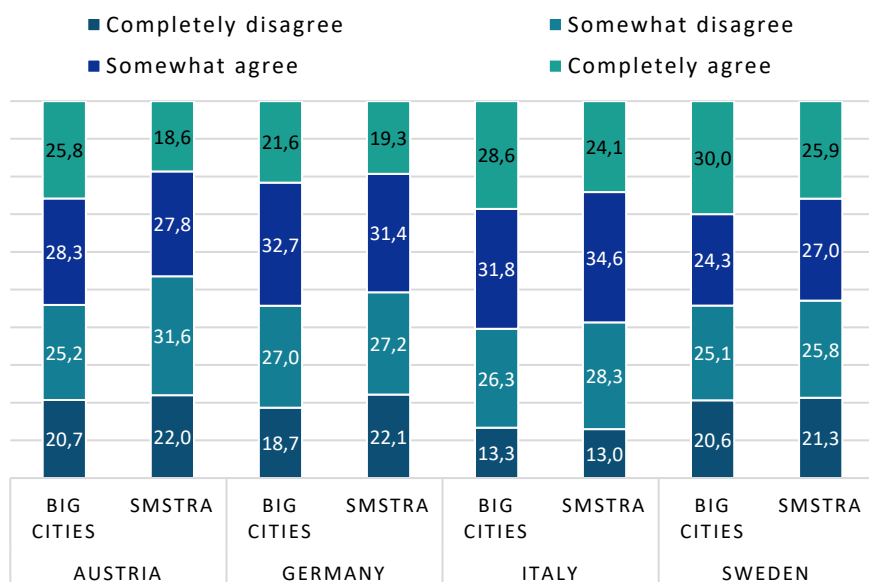
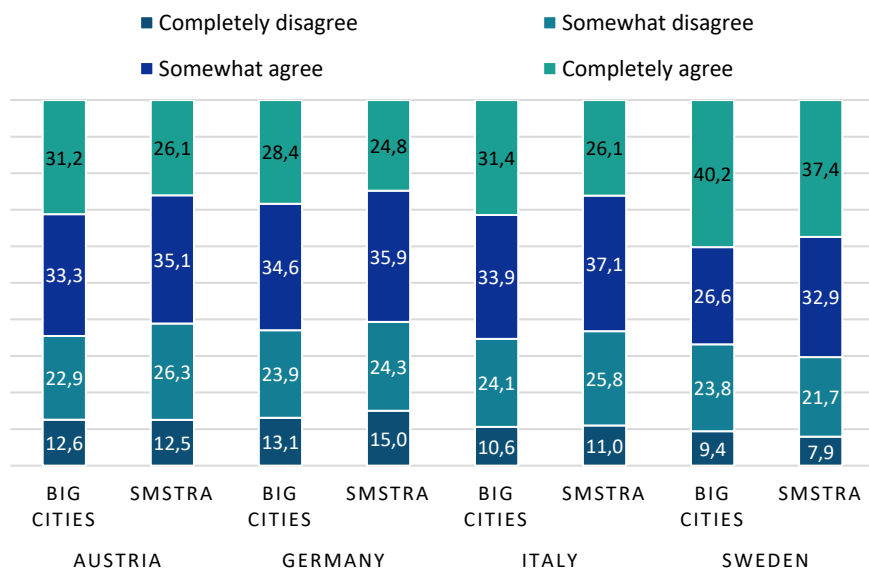


Figure 6. Policies should provide full support to Ukrainian refugees



What fosters positive opinions on integration outcomes?

Finally, some regression analyses were carried out to estimate the relationship between perceptions of the degree of integration of refugees and other key variables such as type of municipality and intergroup contact by respondents. The main differences and similarities in the variables of interest regarding refugees from outside Europe and Ukrainian refugees in Sweden are as follows:

- Having contact with refugees from outside Europe in leisure activities, at university or at their children's day care centre or school increases the likelihood that people perceive non-European refugees to be well integrated. This relationship is not statistically significant for Ukrainian refugees.
- People who think that non-European refugees increase crime in Sweden are more likely to perceive this group as not well integrated, while the same relationship between integration and crime is not significant for Ukrainians. This finding may be explained by negative attitudes towards non-European refugees.
- There is no statistically significant relationship between the size of the municipality of residence and views on integration.

Policy recommendations

The following policy recommendations derive from the study findings.

Countering misinformation

- The most consistent finding of the Whole-COMM study is the difference in opinions about the integration of Ukrainians compared to non-European refugees. When the survey was conducted in 2023, there were no official statistics on employment rates and other integration indicators for Ukrainian refugees in Sweden. Therefore, people's answers to many of our questions are likely to be based on subjective views on these issues and their perceptions of Ukrainians, rather than on access to information about this group. It is also possible that opinions about non-European refugees are also based to some extent on subjective perceptions of them. In the absence of data, people may rely on their subjective views to evaluate the performance of an immigrant group in Swedish society. This

could benefit anti-immigrant groups. For example, the link made by some respondents between increased crime and a lack of integration among non-European refugees could be based on prejudice.

- Data collection on integration outcomes is of paramount importance in terms of understanding how newcomers – including Ukrainians and those with temporary permits – are doing in Sweden and disseminating the right information. Ukrainians who have come to Sweden under the Temporary Protection Directive have not yet entered the labour market and are not included in the population register. Therefore, there are no official statistics on key indicators such as employment rates for this group.
- Official statistics are also essential in order to assess the impact of different integration policies for Ukrainians and other refugees.

Tackling racism and discrimination

In the absence of official statistics and based on previous research on attitudes towards migrants and their integration, it is reasonable to assume that opinions on integration outcomes are correlated with specific attitudes towards each of the two groups examined in this study. In Sweden, the majority of respondents identified refugees from outside Europe with people from the Middle East and, to a lesser extent, from Africa.

- Educational programmes as part of the school curriculum and public campaigns are needed in Sweden to address the rights and experiences of refugees, to combat racism, discrimination and stigma associated with Middle Easterners, and to promote intergroup relations and social cohesion.
- The national and local governments, in cooperation with civil society organisations, should further investigate the sources of perceived tension and hostility between refugees from non-EU countries and long-term residents, especially in larger cities. Based on this research, a plan should be developed to mitigate tensions by addressing the possible causes.

Fostering inter-group relations

The results of our study show that the context of intergroup contact is important in promoting positive public opinion. In particular, participation in recreational activities with newcomers improves public opinion about them.

- Inclusive civil society organizations and other community-level groups should be supported to arrange activities that can bring together refugees and members of the host society by promoting intergroup contact on equal terms and presenting narratives that offer alternative images to stereotypes. For example, meetings around common interests such as sports, crafts, first aid courses, film clubs, etc. Information about these groups needs to be disseminated among refugees.
- Funding bodies at national and local level should have specific calls to support this type of activity.
- Local authorities could facilitate these meetings by providing facilities, sports equipment and other resources for organizing leisure activities and by promoting such activities.

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The authors are fully responsible for the report's contents including its conclusions and policy recommendations.



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