

# Migration, integration, and political participation: The perspectives of young people with a migration background

*JOINT POSITION PAPER OF THE EU  
CONSULTATIVE GROUP OF YOUNG MIGRANTS*

Consulting  
**EUTH**

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# ABOUT THE AUTHORS

This position paper was produced by the members of the EU Consultative Group for Young People with a Migration Background, which is facilitated by the Migration Policy Group (MPG) within the framework of the EU-funded Consulting Euth project.

We are a group of young experts in different sectors, based in the EU and with a migration background. As such, either directly or through our family history, we have experienced many of the issues raised in this position paper. We understand the struggles and the needs it outlines, especially those of young people, and make several recommendations that could significantly improve the functioning of relevant systems. We have also been directly trained and mentored to write position papers and engage with policy-makers.

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[Learn more about the Consulting Euth project here.](#)

# 1. INTRODUCTION: WHY DOES THE VOICE OF MIGRANT YOUTH MATTER?

In the intricate tapestry of the modern world, the voices of migrant youth have emerged as a critical and resonant chorus demanding our attention and understanding. The complex global landscape has borne witness to profound social and political upheavals, exemplified by the fervent French protests in June 2023 and the simultaneous rise of far-right movements. These turbulent shifts have cast a shadow over the fabric of European society, challenging the quality and uniformity of integration policies and posing a significant threat to social cohesion.

In parallel, the European Union (EU) has witnessed a profound transformation, catalysed by the arrival of refugees, asylum seekers, and other migrants. Migration has put social and education systems to the test, increasing pressure on governments to manage migration and delivering integration opportunities for people with migration backgrounds. In this context the lives of migrant youth should be at the centre of the discussion, as they are particularly affected. As of 1 January 2022, approximately 6.6 million children did not have the citizenship of their country of residence within the EU. This accounted for 8.2% of all children in the EU and a staggering 17.6% of non-national residents.

Remarkably, within the EU, young people with a migrant background make up 21% of the current 15-34 age group, totaling 25.5 million individuals. Among them, a little over 4% are native-born children of immigrants, and a similar number arrived in the EU as children under the age of 15.

Additionally, 5% are EU natives of mixed parentage, and an additional 8% were over the age of 18 when they immigrated. These figures reflect a diverse and dynamic community that is integral to the cultural and social tapestry of the EU.

The challenges faced by refugees and children of immigrants, particularly those of non-European origin, are substantial and multifaceted. These young individuals grapple with social and cultural adaptation, language barriers, and the intricate process of translating their qualifications to align with the host country's standards. These hurdles obstruct their path to education and employment opportunities and hinder their integration into their host society.

Equally troubling is the presence of discrimination and prejudice, fueled partly by media representation, which further complicates their journey towards belonging and acceptance. In many instances, migrant youth find themselves standing at the crossroads of preserving their national culture while navigating limited avenues for self-expression. This predicament is exacerbated by legal and financial constraints that restrict the spaces available for the celebration and expression of diverse cultures.

In this context, the voices of migrant youth matter profoundly. They are not only witness to the evolving dynamics of migration and integration but are also active participants in shaping the future of the EU. Their experiences and aspirations offer unique insight to the challenges and opportunities that this diverse and growing community faces.

This paper constitutes an effort to bring the perspectives and voices of people with migration background to the discussion. It addresses different stages of integration, starting with migrants' access to the EU in the context of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum, access to education and vocational training and recognition of qualifications, promotion of cultural diversity and belonging, and political participation.

## 2. ACCESS TO THE EU: NEW PACT ON MIGRATION AND ASYLUM

As of 20th December 2023, the European Parliament, Council and Commission have reached a political agreement on the Pact on Migration and Asylum. Nevertheless, the considerations and recommendations presented in this paper continue to be relevant as many issues relating to solidarity and the protection of children persist. For instance, according to the new agreement, there will be no exceptions for children and their families when it comes to the application of border procedures including pre-screening, which will be mandatory for all Member States. Moreover, border procedures will even apply to unaccompanied minors, for 'national security' reasons. Providing additional safeguards for minors along with these changes is not sufficient and does not take into account the best interests of the child. The Pact, as it is currently agreed upon, does not permit a fair and complete examination of asylum applications, harming in particular children and children transitioning to adulthood.

Countless efforts to ensure just and fair migration management by the EU have not been effective in recent decades. Moreover, focus on issues relating to minors and overall human rights-centred approaches has been absent within the migration discourse of the EU while focus on 'securitisation' and deportation has prevailed. Discussions about the Pact on Migration and Asylum are of paramount relevance in light of the recent political agreement. As young activists with a migration background, we aim to provide an alternative vision wherein the interests and rights of human beings are truly at the core of any policy-making process.

## RECOMMENDATION 1

Provide minors with assistance from a representative and ensure continuation of relevant rights and safeguards for a transitional period following their 18th birthday.

We are particularly concerned that persons transitioning to adulthood are not supported with safeguarding measures or regarded as having special needs. The mere fact of turning 18 years old does not immediately provide the capability to be fully independent and to navigate the asylum system alone; rather those aged 18 continue to be exposed to the same risks as those under the age of 18. This is especially true for unaccompanied minors. In 2022, for instance, while 1 in every 6 applicants under the age of 18 was identified as unaccompanied, over half of this group (aged between 14 and 17) was not assisted by a responsible adult. In 2021, moreover, 68% of the 23 255 unaccompanied asylum seeking minors in the EU were aged 16 to 17. The proposed Asylum Procedures Regulation (APR) explicitly states in article 22 that a child's representative (or the relevant person with related skills) is no longer needed when there is no doubt that they are of legal adult age.

## RECOMMENDATION 2

Integrate child-focused and human rights-driven principles in migration policies.

The Dublin rules challenge the EU's solidarity principle, resulting in such crises as the record arrival of people to the island of Lampedusa in September 2023. The Voluntary Solidarity Mechanism (VSM)'s stated aim of easing these strains was not fully met in 2022, with only a third of the relocation goal achieved. Lampedusa events and ensuing administrative challenges, such as those seen in Germany, suggest a lapse in upholding child welfare, a commitment under the Convention on the Rights of the Child. UNICEF data highlights the gravity of such a lapse, counting 11 600 children having navigated the dangerous Mediterranean route to Italy in the first half of 2023. The tragic loss of a young Guinean child, among others, underscores this urgency.

Moreover, agreements such as the EU-Turkey deal of 2016 and the EU-Tunisia deal face scrutiny for potentially neglecting human rights. Therefore, the EU needs to integrate child-focused and human rights-driven principles in its migration policies. Specifically, systems like the VSM and the safe third country (STC) concept must prioritise the safety and rights of young migrants, in line with the EU's core ethos and global obligations.

### RECOMMENDATION 3

Clarify that the STC concept must not be applied when children, especially unaccompanied minors, are involved OR, at least, include in the pact sections relating explicitly to child-friendly and rights-centred approaches that protect young migrants.

The STC concept emerges in the special procedures of the pact, namely the accelerated examination procedure, the inadmissibility procedure, and the border procedure, which all play a central role in the proposed APR. Article 40(5), for instance, explicitly mentions cases where the accelerated examination procedure may be applied to unaccompanied minors, but does not reference exceptions for children. Although Chapter II sets out guarantees for both accompanied and unaccompanied children - such as the obligation to “take into account the best interests of children” - the special procedures mentioned are designed so that certain guarantees can be bypassed in favour of a fast-paced procedure that cannot ensure the prioritisation of all the needs of children and youth. As already mentioned, from January - July 2023 around 11 600 children have taken the Mediterranean route towards Italy, the majority setting off from Libya and Tunisia. Since these are also third countries with which the EU and/or individual member states have made deals, migrants and asylum seekers who have left them, including children, face the risk of readmission.

**[Read more about those recommendations and how to put them in action here.](#)**

# 3. ACCESS TO EDUCATION

**This section analyses the current state of education for migrant communities in the EU, including the reasons for disparities in educational attainment.**

Educational attainment and academic development seem to be topics of secondary importance to the EU when assessing the reality of people with a migration background. Educational attainment is often discussed primarily within the context of gender. The role of education in improving migrants' quality of life cannot be overstated, however, and a focus on their experiences within the EU in this sense can provide key insights into the well-being of European society at large.

## RECOMMENDATION 1

Develop academic environments for migrants that foster their thriving beyond assimilationism and individualism. Both first-generation migrants and children of immigrants are vulnerable to this attainment gap.

## RECOMMENDATION 2

Prioritise building a sense of belonging in discussions on diversity, equality and inclusion (DEI) in education.

This is essential given that a child's school environment is often the main forum for their social interaction and development outside the home. It is also important to integrate the family of the child into the process of schooling, especially if the parents themselves are less socially integrated. This could be achieved via targeted measures, such as the provision of translators or special information sessions designed to familiarise parents with the education system. This can reduce disadvantages children may face in the future, too, as education becomes more compartmentalised and divergent as they grow older.

# 4. ENHANCING INCLUSION THROUGH EMPLOYMENT AND VOCATIONAL TRAINING (VET)

**A crucial part of successful integration is the recognition and acquisition of educational qualifications. With an unemployment rate twice as high as that of local populations and a tendency to hold precarious and low-skilled jobs, refugees face major obstacles: language barriers, non-recognition of their qualifications, and discrimination.**

Migrants' talents and skills are highly in demand in European labour markets, however migrants still face many difficulties in finding jobs that reflect their skill level. Across the EU in 2022, the over-qualification rate was 39.4% for non-EU citizens and 21% for natives. With this gap in mind, a key strategy of both the Actional Plan on Integration and Inclusion and the European Skills Agenda is to boost VET. However, in reality some recent articles\* have shown that migrants have a more difficult time accessing, finishing, and ultimately profiting from participation in such programmes than their native counterparts.

\*See, for example, Paul 2023, Böhn & Deutscher 2022, Wolffhardt et al. 2021, and Kogan 2016.

## RECOMMENDATION 1

Overcome language barriers with an incentive system that allows EU companies to invest in language courses for their refugee and migrant employees.

The ability to access the majority of jobs in EU countries hinges on reaching a particular level of language proficiency, even in less specialised roles where comprehension of instructions and safety protocols remains essential. Granting asylum seekers access to language courses would not only ease their transition into their first job, but would also empower them to secure employment that better matches their skills and aligns with their career aspirations. The EU should therefore establish an incentive system encouraging companies to recruit migrant employees and invest in their language courses.

## RECOMMENDATION 2

Renew the European Qualifications Framework in a way that considers migrants' academic qualifications.

The renewal of the European framework of skills system should ensure that refugees' and migrants' qualifications are recognised as accurately as possible, allowing them to access appropriate educational and employment opportunities. Delays in recognition often hinder access to higher education and skilled employment opportunities. Streamlined processes would reduce bureaucratic barriers and provide faster results, allowing refugees to rebuild their lives more efficiently. Drawing inspiration from the pioneering work of the APSR (Welcome to Refugee Doctors and Healthcare Workers in France), this system would combine financial support, peer assessment, and hands-on experience, and offer guidance, evaluation, and validation internships to qualified professionals. We therefore strongly recommend that EU officials revise the European framework for skills recognition to improve the recognition of the academic qualifications of refugees.

### RECOMMENDATION 3

The development of stronger VET systems must come with the integration of migrants into VET programmes.

EU agencies such as Cedefop and existing coordination networks such as the European Network for Public Employment Services should keep tracking and thematising migrant access to VET programmes while supporting the European Qualifications Framework and those frameworks that exist at the national level. However, member states have the responsibility - as stipulated in the Council recommendation on vocational education and training for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness, and resilience 2020 - to create inclusive VET programmes accessible to vulnerable groups, such as people with migrant backgrounds.

Unfortunately, member states with strong VET systems often fail to facilitate access to vocational training for third-country national (TCN) migrants. According to the latest Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX) data, only half of EU countries (15 of 27) guarantee equal access to education and VET to all migrants without considerable restriction. Six of the nine member states that have above-average vocational systems overall in terms of access for migrants\*\* (Germany, Austria, Netherlands, Denmark, Czechia, Slovenia) offer only restricted access to VET for TCNs. Without access to training, migrants face more (in)formal obstacles while seeking work in these countries.

\*\*Measuring the degree of the VET-System on the Eurostat (2020) Indicator: Enterprises employing IVT participants by size class - % of all enterprises

## RECOMMENDATION 4

Member states should design VET programmes that take the needs of migrants and refugees into account.

It is important to increase information flows and coordination work:

1. The EC should keep supporting the European Training Foundation (ETF). The ETF has a key role in strengthening relations between the EU and neighbouring countries in the field of human capital development;
2. Local employment authorities and immigration offices must acknowledge their role as gatekeepers or beacons for people with migration backgrounds in often very complex systems and provide both immaterial (e.g. guidelines, training) and material (scholarships, funding) support to people with migration backgrounds;
3. Initiatives that promote migrants' cooperative contact with potential employers and colleagues - for example, simultaneous language learning and training - are essential and have a stronger impact than separate migrant vocational programmes.

The path to vocational training often resembles a labyrinth. Young new immigrants are burdened in their everyday lives by financial pressure, lack of knowledge of the system, and sometimes psychological, social, and residential burdens or discrimination. In that context, the results of NIEM data\*\*\* are very concerning: Sweden is the only EU country of the 14 studied in the NIEM-Index that identifies groups in need of special attention in mainstream vocational training / education and makes targeted programmes available.

\*\*\*14 EU-countries: Czechia, France, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden.

## RECOMMENDATION 5

Partnerships for VET programmes must be negotiated by member states and local authorities transparently, with reference to employers' intentions and expectations regarding the inclusion of migrants.

Partners cooperating on this issue must be interested in boosting migrant development, with no arbitrary differentiation in treatment and opportunity between native and migrant participants. A study using EU labour force data shows that training does not automatically lead to better outcomes for migrants: only one of 15\*\*\*\* EU countries surveyed (Italy) demonstrates a positive outcome of training on the occupational status of migrants, and in one country the effect was found to be negative (Ireland). These findings can be the result of external factors: VET might happen in a difficult to access labour market, for example, where some or many employers are interested in integrating migrants into their workforce but not for jobs that correspond to a high level of qualification. Studies have long established that migrants' jobs tend to be especially vulnerable to crisis, and that migrants tend to be overrepresented in unstable, short, jobs with limited opportunity for progression, which natives are often not willing to take up or to take up for a longer time period.

**[Read more about those recommendations and how to put them in action here.](#)**

\*\*\*\*Austria, Belgium, Luxembourg, Germany, Spain, France, Greece, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, the United Kingdom, Cyprus, and Portugal.

# 5. POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Participation in local, national and European life remains one of the biggest integration challenges that people with a migration background face. More specifically, political participation is the weakest area of integration policy in the world according to MIPEX (the average national MIPEX score on this is 25/100). Most people with a migration background are granted little opportunity to inform and improve the policies and decisions that affect them daily, even though political participation would favour their representation and integration. (Engdahl & Rosengvist 2020 ; Ferwerda & Finseraas 2020). It also leads to more effective, legitimate, and relatable policies and programmes that align with the experiences of people with migration backgrounds (Meaningful Refugee participation, Global refugee network; EPIM, 2019).

As youth with migration backgrounds, we highlight the challenges we encounter to participating as citizens in political processes, at local, national and international level. Here we identify four main areas in which political participation should be discussed:

## 5.1 *Changing the narrative:*

The narrative portraying migrants as victims can hinder their participation in decision-making processes, perpetuating stereotypes of vulnerability and limited capability (EPIM, 2021; Global Refugee Network, 2021). This not only affects people with migration backgrounds but also has a profound impact on us, young individuals, leading to disenfranchisement and disillusionment.

Similarly, EU citizens with migration backgrounds encounter barriers rooted in stereotypes and discrimination, preventing them from being equal participants in shaping policies. Consequently, despite sharing personal stories in non-political contexts, our contributions to policy discussions often remain limited.

### RECOMMENDATION 1

We urge the EU to train institutional workers, public institution staff and representatives and journalists in inter-cultural approaches, inclusive language and overcoming bias towards people with migration background and young people. (Example: Resilient Cities).

### RECOMMENDATION 2

Create spaces for exchange between people with migration backgrounds, local populations, and institutions in order to address biases and create interpersonal links.

## 5.2 Voting rights

The right to vote and to stand for election is well recognised as the basis for a democratic society. In most countries of the EU, however, it is a right reserved for national or EU citizens, *de facto* excluding many immigrants from the political community. Other barriers to meaningful participation and voting rights include: the candidate recruitment strategies of political parties, electoral rules, and knowledge about civic/political rights.

Naturalised migrants, second-generation migrants, and EU mobile citizens, despite representing a significant part of the EU population, are also underrepresented in local, national and EU elections. The participation gap is not limited to election turnout but also encompasses underrepresentation of racial and ethnic minorities in legislative bodies and political roles.

In EU elections, there is significant underrepresentation of ethnic minorities among elected MEPs: surprisingly, only 13 of the 28 EU member states elected ethnic minority MEPs. Finally, as highlighted by MIPEX, difficult access to nationality - and, by extension, voting rights - is a major area of weakness in most EU countries.

### RECOMMENDATION 3

In line with the EU's ninth Common Basic Principle for Immigrant Integration Policy, we urge the EU and its member states to:

1. Grant the right to vote and stand in local elections to all legally established immigrants, regardless of their origin.
2. Implement, for ethnic minority groups, proportional representation and preferential voting in EU, national, regional, and local elections.
3. Reduce barriers to citizenship (such as residence time required) in order to make access to voting rights faster.
4. Enhance public awareness of voting rights, voting and registration processes, the political system and political parties, and the importance of civic engagement and voting, through collaboration between community organisations, cultural centres and language schools.
5. Simplify voting registration and voting procedures, provide assistance during the various voting processes, and invest in civic education and research.
6. Allow the participation of non-EU legal residents in the European Citizens' initiative programme.

### 5.3 Access to information

The EU Action Plan 2021-2027 underscores the importance of access to information and inclusive language. Barriers to migrant participation include limited awareness of opportunities to volunteer and engage politically in the host community. Individuals from diverse migratory backgrounds, facing difficulties in accessing vital information - worsened by the pandemic - often express diminished trust in institutions due to perceived lack of transparency in information dissemination and political processes. Language proficiency and information access are also significant hurdles, emphasising the need for an inclusive environment that empowers participation regardless of one's background.

#### RECOMMENDATION 4

We urge the EU and its member states to make information more accessible through multilingual and visual content that is easily shareable on social media, as well as through online multilingual digital platforms dedicated to democratic rights awareness (such as the [FutureUS App](#)).

#### RECOMMENDATION 5

Promote continuous legal awareness campaigns.

#### RECOMMENDATION 6

Create partnerships between authorities and local NGOs / civil society, and provide for information exchange (in person and/or online) at the local level.

## 5.4 *Improving access to political participation*

The lack of contacts and experience in policy and participation, particularly among people with migration backgrounds, women, and young people, as emphasised by [the Global Refugee Network guidelines](#) and related [EPIM report \(2021\)](#), hinders their effective engagement in political processes. Training and coordination spaces for advocates are limited, preventing many valuable voices from being heard.

Moreover, a disconnect from political and democratic processes is common, leading to a lack of trust and commitment, especially among young people. Consultations with people with migration backgrounds often fall short, lacking equitable access and sustainable engagement, as observed in [the EPIM report \(2021\)](#). To achieve meaningful participation, striving for the highest level of involvement - "doing with" rather than "doing to or for", as described by [Kuntzelman & Noor \(2022\)](#) - is crucial. Additionally, financial constraints and a lack of support further hinder long-term participatory work, with women and youth facing additional barriers to funding, as noted by [GRN, EU-COMAR & NWC \(2022\)](#).

## Recommendation 7

We urge the EU and its member states to improve conditions for participation by:

1. Removing barriers to participation that exist for people with migration backgrounds by promoting their access to basic needs fulfilment, leadership, and capacity-building (examples: [The Democracy Academy](#), [Emerging Leaders fellowship](#), [Resilient Cities](#)), accounting for specific individual requirements (such as childcare and reimbursements) as well as formally recognising their time/work.
2. Creating and funding more inclusive and sustainable participatory mechanisms that meaningfully include the perspectives of people with migration backgrounds (such as [Consulting EUTH](#)) from start to finish. This includes training for public officials on how to engage and support people with migration backgrounds (such as [Resilient Cities](#)).
3. Improving diverse representation in institutions and public spaces through quotas for participation in events, councils, and democratic processes, regardless of an individual's administrative status, and quotas for diversity among staff in public institutions and national/international organisations/NGOs for people with a migration background - regardless of administrative status - whenever possible.
4. Supporting and empowering migrant-led initiatives and advocates through 1) ensuring sustainable European, national, and local (targeted) funding mechanisms and support; 2) creating, promoting and funding European/local networks; 3) establishing relationships and partnerships with migrant-led NGOs.
5. For municipalities/local institutions specifically: 1) encouraging cross-municipal exchanges and collaboration of EU networks for participation, emphasising the early inclusion of people with migration backgrounds in project planning; 2) promoting initiatives such as participatory budgeting, community engagement, and the appointment of a Migrant Engagement Officer; 3) launching advocacy campaigns for voting rights and candidacy eligibility for non-nationals in local elections.

**[Read more about those recommendations and how to put them in action here.](#)**

## 6. CONCLUSION

The perspectives shared within this paper demonstrate that young migrants' voices are significant for multiple reasons. The experiences, backgrounds, and viewpoints that young migrants bring to their host countries are varied, contributing to the promotion of inclusivity and solidarity and to tolerance and understanding of different cultures, and ensuring diversity.

Young migrants frequently face particular difficulties, including restricted access to resources, discrimination, and language hurdles. Fighting for their rights, understanding complex immigration law, and knowing how to navigate the risks of incarceration and deportation are of paramount importance in attempting to improve their living conditions.

Young migrants can offer important perspectives on the real-world effects of immigration laws and initiatives. As made clear by the above recommendations, their personal experiences can help countries design more equitable and successful immigration policies and influence better governance. Young migrants frequently adopt a distinct global viewpoint, by virtue of their exposure to diverse cultures and situations. This can be very helpful in tackling global problems, encouraging collaboration, and developing creative solutions. Migrant youth can also help to dispel myths and misconceptions around immigration by sharing their knowledge, experiences and opinions, which in turn can contribute to a more realistic picture of migrants and mobility among the wider public.

In conclusion, young people who are migrants have voices that matter because they promote a society that is more compassionate, fair, and inclusive.

# CONTACT

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**Learn more about the Consulting Euth project [here](#).**

