HOUSE_IN

Exchange and innovation for migrants' access to housing and social inclusion

CITY REPORT RIGA

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Last update: 3 Dec 2021

Table of Contents

1. Introduction to the city: History, trajectories, specificities 1
2. Population composition and socio-economic profile 2
3. Housing market structure 3
4. Housing practices: integration potential 5
5. Housing practices: integration challenges 6
6. Governance of housing integration 7
7. Effects of outstanding events / crises 8
8. Outlook 9
References 10

1. Introduction to the city: History, trajectories, specificities

The capital of Latvia – Riga, was founded in 1201 by German settlers as a colonial town (Bartlett, 1993) over settlements inhabited by the now virtually extinct Livs. As a natural harbour connecting trade routes, since its beginnings it has always been a multi-ethnic hub and a transcultural city (Berg, 2011) that through numerous military conquests (Polish-Lithuanian – 1581, Swedish – 1621, Russian – 1710) has undergone significant shifts in its ethnic composition. While medieval ethnicity is to be approached with caution, there are traces that the now dominant (but not majority) Latvians' identity was deeply connected with class that can be traced through Beer Carters' and Porters' guilds records that show Latvians gaining influence starting from the reformation in the 16th century (Strenga, 2021) as well as through forming associations and massive working class protests during the 1905 revolution which many historians also connect with ethnic consciousness.

The city center started to gain much of its current look starting in mid-19th century with the demolition of city's defensive wall. This came together with rapid industrialization as Riga became one of the major ports of the Russian empire spurring a period of population growth (from 100 000 in 1867 to around half a million in 1913 (Berg, 2011)) with subsequent rapid construction. If the defensive wall also marked centuries long ethnic and class segregation with what is now the 'old town' being inhabited by German upper class, the new changes produced segregation by housing type due to its affordability. If in 1867 Latvians constituted 23% of the population, by 1897 they were already 45% due to peasant rural-urban migration. Mostly, however, they came to reside in two-story wooden houses without water or sanitation despite massive construction of four to five-story brick rental buildings.

Housing shortage, thus, was ongoing in the second part of 19th century that continued after the declaration of the Latvian state in the 1920s and only then started to take the discursive frame of a housing crisis. In the years of declaration of the Latvian state, the 30s also marked a period of municipal experiments with getting involved in the housing market. Due to a wide housing crisis, municipality

developed several affordable housing projects that nevertheless due to its relatively higher standard than average housing was mostly rented to middle class residents (Sils, 2017).

The Soviet period introduced mass building of large housing estates which still house around 70% of Rigans (Krišjāne et al, 2019, 229). Mass housing was also linked to planned migration. Apartments in the newly built microdistricts were prioritized to migrants in ways that still affect residential differentiation in Riga (ibid, 227). At the same time, if the Russian-speaking migrants were in a privileged position during the Soviet period, then after the breaking up of Soviet Union and subsequent deindustrialization, many were left socio-economically disadvantaged (ibid, 228). Nevertheless, the microdistricts continue to hold a strong social mix and haven't declined as other large housing estates in certain European cities.

Since the 1990 transition Riga has lost around 300 000 inhabitants (CSB, 2021) due to former migrants returning to Soviet Union and many leaving to Western Europe since Latvia joined European Union in 2004 and after the financial crisis of 2008 and subsequent austerity policies. The shrinking of the city has resulted in many empty buildings, especially in the city center which has lost around 20 000 inhabitants since 2000. The 1990s also marked increased socio-spatial segregation in terms of the widely different refurbishments of the housing stock (Krišjāne & Bērziņš, 2014)

The city development is also marked by suburbanization since many upper middle class families desire a separate house in the suburbs and around Riga, which has been a growing area for the past 20 years in opposition to the neighborhoods of Riga. Nevertheless, Latvia has the highest rate of apartment dwellers compared to houses in the EU (65.9%).

Currently Riga markets itself as a green 'city of possibilities' with vast surrounding forest areas and good conditions for starting a business that unites German and Russian architectural wonders and aspires to become a 'Northern European metropolis' (Riga Strategy 2030). At the same time, it struggles with critiques and portrayals of it as a car-centric post-Soviet city with vast inequalities in income, housing and social inclusion.

2. Population composition (share of migrants, origins) and socioeconomic profile

The Central Statistical Bureau of the Republic of Latvia collects regular regional data on inhabitants' ethnicity, citizenship and country of origin. According to their data at the start of year 2021, Riga had 614 618 inhabitants, a slight decrease from 621 120 in 2020, but exemplary of a general trend of shrinking. From these, people who identify as Latvians constitute 47,2% of the inhabitants in 2021, as Russians – 36%, Belarussians – 3,6%, Ukrainians – 3,5%, Poles – 1,7%, Lithuanians – 0,8% with the rest 7,2% counted as other ethnicities.

In terms of citizenship, however, the situation is quite different. In Riga, 78,7% hold Latvian citizenship, 15,8% hold Latvian non-citizen passport (a status invented after the break-up of Soviet Union to force people who moved to Latvia after 1940 to learn Latvian), 0,6% are EU-27 citizens (dominant being Lithuanian – 0,2% and Estonian – 0,1%), but 4,9% hold non-EU citizenship. More specifically, 3,2%, are citizens of the Russian Federation, but 0,5% – hold Ukrainian and 0,2% – Belarussian citizenship. Thus, while most do hold Latvian citizenship, 31,3% percent of Russians in Riga have non-citizen status and despite international pressure continue to be prohibited from voting in municipal elections. Importantly, while Latvia has one of the highest at-risk of poverty rates in the EU at 21,6% (2019, CSB), it is even higher for non-citizens (28%) and other citizens (31%). Riga, however, holds a lower at-risk of poverty rate at 15,9% if compared to other parts of the country.

In regards to country of origin, 17,4% of inhabitants in Riga have a recorded migration history with 1,3% being born in the EU-27 countries, but 16% in non-EU countries, of these 94,2% being born in states of Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). To compare with previous figures on ethnicity

and citizenship, 8,9% were born in the Russian Federation, 2,6% - in Ukraine, but 2,4% – in Belarus. 0,8% of inhabitants of Riga were born in countries neither of EU-27 or CIS.

In general, the net migration rate in Riga in 2020 was -1024. Migration-wise, since 2021, 72% of inhabitants continue to live in Riga, 7% have emigrated, but 3% have immigrated. The rest is internal migration within Latvia. Data on migrants' citizenship are collected for the national context, but most migrants still end up in Riga. In 2020, 1129 citizens coming to Latvia were from Ukraine, 625 from Russia, 441 from Uzbekistan, 422 from India, 246 from Belarus with the leader from the EU being Lithuania with 111 citizens. Thus, while immigration continues to be primarily from CIS countries, but the direction of emigration is mostly to EU-28 countries, there are also several new trends, for example, the increased influx of students from South Asia, especially, India.

In terms of asylum seeking, according to the Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs, in 2020, 147 persons requested asylum while 8 were granted refugee, but 17 – alternative status. Most requests were from Belarus, Russian Federation and Syria[1]. In 2021, the asylum requests have already been 470[2] which is more than the previous high at 395 in 2017.

In Latvia, immigration discourse is dominated by a heightened sense of external threat (Lulle & Ungure, 2015) stemming from histories of Soviet immigration associated with Russian imperialism and potential extinction of the Latvian language. At the breaking of Soviet Union more people in Latvia spoke Russian than Latvian, which was among the reasons why non-citizen status as a stimulus to language-learning as a requirement for full citizenship was invented. In this context, most types of migration are received with caution and even the attempts to internationalize academic personnel are met with significant resistance. In addition to being a threat, asylum seekers are often portrayed as a social burden rather than workforce, taking away the social budget that is already low for those at-risk of poverty. This is more acute for migrants from Middle Eastern countries who are often portrayed as 'different' in comparison to migrants from CIS countries who share post-Soviet connections and can speak the widely-known Russian language.

On the other spectrum, there is a political liberal discourse aiming to stimulate acceptance of immigration, anti-racist activism and promotion of 'tolerance' as a moral project of modern Europeanness that portrays Latvia as a backwards country due to continued resistance to immigration (Dzenovska, 2018). This is most often emphasised by human rights organisations and European institutions. Most positive discourses, however, are at least partly selectionist aiming to produce a figure of the respectable and compassion-deserving refugee – either a highly skilled migrant that can offer a significant contribution to the workforce or a family with children with knowledge of an EU language (Lulle & Ungure, 2015). At the same time, NGO activism has mostly rather emphasised practical support to refugees rather than political and ideological campaigns.

3. Housing market structure

To begin with, the *national* housing market structure since the restoration of independence in the early 1990s reflects the outcomes of large-scale privatisation programmes whereby most households were able to assume ownership over their apartments or houses. The composition of the tenure structure is such that about 80% of the households are owner-occupied, about 10% of the housing is in the private rental market though the share is probably a higher as another 10% of the housing is in the informal market where owners refuse to register the contracts to avoid tax obligations. Social housing is very small – less than 1% according to European Commission estimates. While this particular tenure structure

[1] Statistics on asylum seekers until 2021. https://www.pmlp.gov.lv/en/statistics-asylum-seekers-until-2021
[2] 470 people have requested asylum in Latvia this year. https://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/society/470-people-have-requested-asylum-in-latvia-this-year.a419551/

appears as an aberration in global comparison, it is less so if one only pays attention to Eastern Europe where this is indeed the norm.

While there are not data available particularly for Riga, it is likely that the tenure structure would be very similar to the national scale. While having housing in private ownership might indicate an active housing market, the opposite is the case: market activity tends to be very low. This is so for two reasons: one relates to the overall quality of housing. Quality has been consistently highlighted as a long-running issue as most of the houses are overcrowded, meaning that the size of the living space is small relative to the number of people in a household. Moreover, despite the fact that most houses (42%) in Riga are essentially residential private houses while multi-storey apartment houses form only about 12% of the housing, 93% of the residents live in the latter. Most people live in the so-called *micro-rayons* or districts around the centre which were historically built in the Soviet era and consist of the infamous multi-storey housing blocks.

The second reason for low market activity relates to the issue of financial access. Most households, despite owning their apartments, are not able to move to another location. According to OECD estimates, more than 80% of the households would not be able to buy or rent a new apartment without spending more than 30% of their monthly income, meaning they would be over-burdened. In essence, households may be asset-rich but they are cash-poor. The low quality of housing is further reinforced by the inability to arrange the necessary renovations for the entire building as it often requires the agreement of every owner. It has been a persistent narrative that people tend to see their ownership as simply a right to a space without a corresponding sense of responsibility for the wider infrastructure of which they are a part.

It is also noteworthy that according to the last census in 2011, there are about 55 000 units of apartments empty (about 17% of the total). While this may be a potentially positive aspect when considering options for satisfying various housing needs, in reality it tends to reflect the low and deteriorating quality of the houses as well as the inability to make the necessary renovations due to various owner interests. Furthermore, the data may also reflect the housing assets that remain on the bank balance sheets from the 2008 financial crisis for which there is no official data available.

There are very few restrictions placed on foreigners for gaining access to housing. Primarily it depends on the kind of residence permit a person will have. If it is temporary, the person will not have access to municipal social housing and social assistance. However, for subsidiaries of international protection who are issued with a temporary residence permit housing support can be forthcoming. For a long time, the biggest challenge for beneficiaries of international protection was the rule concerning the eligibility of housing benefits. Namely, one could only claim housing benefits after securing a residence. Thus, in the moment when such housing benefits were needed the most, they were effectively unavailable. However, once housing had been secured, a person could apply for such benefits. This rule was changed in 2021 and now people who cannot prove their residence status, can claim a one-off municipal benefit. Still, this benefit doesn't always cover all of the needs, e.g. the security deposit and household items.

Otherwise, foreign-born people have the same sort of rights to access housing as the nationals. Though, the costs of housing in Riga in the private rental market are high as there is no affordable housing policy instituted. Nevertheless, apart from the costs the challenges often lie not so much in the law as in the social attitudes as refugees often face discrimination in the housing market. Owners refuse to rent out apartments or refuse to register the contract or even the possibility to declare the address as the official place of residence, which increases the vulnerability of renters. Yet this obstacle might be removed by the new Law on Rent which prescribes the right of tenants to register the property they are renting as their official place of residence.

The media discourses surrounding the housing market structure are broadly uncritical. The prevailing belief still persists that housing should be subject to the imperatives of the free market and any inhibitions to the free functioning of the free market should be removed. Thus, in 2021 a widely

celebrated change in the law concerned precisely the ability of owners to evict renters much faster than before. It is believed that this change will ultimately lower the rental costs as it will stimulate investor interest in developing rental housing projects though this is still questionable. Other than that, the only media narratives concerning the housing market relate to reports on the market activity without a critical analysis of it.

4. Housing practices: integration potential

Beneficiaries of international protection (are supposed to) "enter the city" upon receiving a refugee or alternative status in Latvia. While awaiting the decision on their asylum application for three-six months, asylum seekers live outside the city of Riga, at the Mucenieki Accommodation Centre for Asylum Seekers, located in the nearby Ropaži municipality. So far some of the grantees of international protection have tended to stay at the Accommodation Centre for some period after receiving the status due to the difficulty in finding suitable accommodation in Riga or elsewhere.

There are no inclusive housing strategies that target beneficiaries of international protection and other third country nationals (migrants/newcomers more generally) as a particular group among the Riga city inhabitants.

Riga municipality offers several nationally prescribed housing solutions, such as social housing and municipality housing for poor and low-income individuals and families; short-term dwelling for socially insecure individuals/families; care homes for retired people, persons with disabilities, and orphans; group flats/houses for people with mental disorders; and shelters for homeless people. As long as refugees/newcomers meet the eligibility criteria (permanent or temporary residence permit, officially declared place of residence, proof of insufficient income, indications of mental/functional disabilities), they can apply for and use these social services. Yet in practice, they face major obstacles that make municipality and state-subsidised housing largely inaccessible. For example, there is a long queue for social and municipality housing in Riga. In 2019, there were 3400 people in the waiting list, with many of them waiting for several years.[3] Short-term dwelling is mostly available to families, not individuals.[4] If there were to be persons willing to abide in group housing or care homes, lack of sufficient Latvian language skills would constitute major social impediment to their inclusion into these facilities. It should also be noted that living conditions in some of the facilities, especially shelters, and, to lesser extent, care homes, are unsatisfactory. In 2020, there were outbreaks of Covid-19 in several care homes and shelters with a high mortality rate. At the time of writing, there were reports of Covid-19 outbreak at two care homes in the Kurzeme region of Latvia.

Student hotels/dormitories and hostels-cum-hotels provide additional housing options though not through any concrete housing strategy. The latter are also used by local people who engage in labour mobility from different Latvian regions to the capital. Again, to be able to use these types of housing, refugees and other newcomers/migrants would either need to enrol as students at one of the local universities or secure enough income for monthly rental payments (though lower than average: ~200-300 euros per month).

Another initiative holding some potential for integration is the Free Riga project,[5] a civil society initiative aiming to bring life into the abandoned buildings in Riga. Some of these buildings can be used as residences though living conditions there are most probably not satisfactory for families with children.

Housing programmes implemented by the municipality hold low promise for social participation. The design of services implies a top-down relationship between the service provider and the mostly passive service receiver. These programmes do not include as their aim the building of social ties within

[3] https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/zinas/latvija/riga-rinda-uz-pasvaldibas-dzivokliem--3401-cilveks.a314491/
[4] Communication with the board member of the NGO „I Want to Help Refugees".
[5] FR (freeriga.lv)

communities. New networks and relationships that may result from the use of housing services are rather an unexpected by-product, not a planned result of the programmes. Moreover, the target groups of housing services tend to be stigmatised as deficient, unsuccessful, and unreliable people (e.g. LSM 2019). The service provider, Riga municipality, has in its turn been criticised for the waste of resources and poor management of the housing fund, which has led to its deterioration (TVNET/ TV3 2021).

Group housing for people with mental disorders, however, has recently enjoyed a more open and welcoming media coverage (e.g. Delfi+ 2019). This is perhaps partly due to the public information campaign titled "Person, not Diagnosis" implemented by the Ministry of Welfare since 2018.[6] The campaign aims to enhance understanding and change public attitudes towards people with mental disorders, children living outside their families and the general goal of de-institutionalisation (a move away from care institutions and into wider society). Thus, if successful, group housing holds potential to be included in the strategy for accommodating other marginalized groups.

To summarise, beneficiaries of international protection and other newcomers cannot rely on specific social housing programmes aimed at fostering their inclusion. They are largely left with a need to secure private rental housing for themselves and then claim social benefits to cover the housing expenses.

5. Housing practices: integration challenges

There are three broad challenges that can be identified in relation to housing integration: discrimination, high costs and lack of institutional competence.

Firstly, most beneficiaries of international protection face ongoing discriminatory attitudes on the part of local landlords. After learning about the legal status or the ethnicity of the potential renter, landlords often refuse to rent out the apartment or unjustifiably increase costs or add fees to the service, such as, demanding extra deposits. Since beneficiaries of international protection are expected to move out of the asylum centre as soon as they are granted their refugee or subsidiary of international protection status, they often do not have sufficient time and resources to find appropriate housing and the discriminatory attitudes in the private rental market exacerbate their situation. Currently, the challenge of discrimination is solved through the work of individual mentors who assist people in finding housing and dealing with other integration challenges. Further work is done by an NGO "I Want to Help Refugees" who use their voluntary resources and donations to arrange rental opportunities as well as acts as a mediator-guarantor in refugee negotiations and contractual relationships with landlords. The NGO has also established good cooperation with a couple of dormitory-type hotels and hostels which provide the beneficiaries of international protection who experience difficulties in finding permanent private housing with a possibility of a longer-term accommodation and even the registration of their official address. One of the hotels is currently being transformed into a social house and has established good cooperation with the Welfare Department of Riga Municipality. As a result, single refugees accommodated at this hotel receive social benefits to cover their housing costs. Others, especially families, who cannot secure private housing soon after receiving the status of international protection have been allowed to prolong their stay at the Accommodation Centre for Asylum Seekers. This solution, however, proved temporary and quite unpredictable with the recent influx of new asylum seekers across the Belarussian-Latvian border. The described solutions are ad hoc measures that have not helped to solve the overwhelming housing problem when structural changes are missing.

Secondly, refugees and beneficiaries of international protection face high housing costs. Since the private rental market is very limited and there is no public option of affordable housing, the rental costs are high even for local inhabitants with stable employment. Access to mortgages and publicly available support for buying a housing unit is practically available only to high earners. As a result, and since most beneficiaries of international protection do not enjoy high wages and readily available

[6] See https://cilveksnevisdiagnoze.lv/cilveks-nevis-diagnoze/

employment, the monetary challenges of accessing housing are enormous. While municipalities may provide a housing benefit to people with very low incomes, up until this year it was only available after a person or a household had already secured housing. Thus, the municipal housing support was not available right when it was needed the most. In 2017, the Ministry of Economics ran a pilot project together with the Society Integration Fund offering financial support to two Syrian refugee families to cover housing for a period of six months. The project, however, was deemed unsuccessful by both the authorities and beneficiaries who considered obligations too strict and the duration of the project insufficient.

Housing tends to be cheaper in Riga's microdistricts, however living away from the city centre tends to add costs, like transport for oneself and the children. Moreover, living in these neighbourhoods tends to emphasise the socio-spatial inequalities which have been already identified in relation to the local population. For example, refugee children cannot access good-quality schools and extra-curricular activities they offer.

Finally, the biggest challenge by far is the lack of institutional design that would engage social groups in need. The lack of overall strategy and the fact that public housing support is available only to the highest earners along with only the lowest earners has created a vacuum of institutional support for the bulk of the population. Beneficiaries of international protection are not one of the priority target groups of municipalities who require immediate assistance due to their vulnerability, therefore they face lengthy waiting periods for subsidized housing, if eligible. Moreover, the quality of social housing is considered to be poor and inappropriate to different housing needs. Consequently, exclusion is designed in the current housing model which has overwhelmingly favoured home ownership and relied on the free market principles to determine the rental opportunities. As a result, the rental market is highly stratified favouring high earners.

6. Governance of housing integration

The Ministry of Economics is the primary responsible institution for the housing policy on the national level. It is currently charged with designing a national housing strategy which would be the first of its kind since the restoration of independence. The aim of the housing policy as currently articulated by the Ministry is to foster the quality and affordability of housing, ensuring appropriate legislation for the governance of residential housing and promoting the development of municipal housing fund. While it is the primary responsible Ministry, since housing policy is cross-sectoral, the functions and responsibilities of the Ministry of Welfare are equally important. Thus, the Ministry of Welfare is responsible for social care and rehabilitation centres. In this they have to cooperate closely with municipalities which are responsible for the provision of social assistance that includes housing. This social assistance is available in three different ways: a municipality may provide a rental housing unit (municipally-owned; social housing or service apartment); it can also provide a housing benefit which is means-tested; finally, it can also offer a social service which may directly or indirectly aid in the housing issue, for example, by placing a person in a crisis centre or a temporary housing unit or in a group apartment.

The close connection between the Ministry of Welfare and the municipalities also illustrates the importance of the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Regional Development which is responsible for the municipal system as a whole and engages in territorial planning policies, important for potentially new housing projects. The Ministry of Finance can also be included as a significant institution as it designs the tax policy on land and real estate thus influencing the development of the housing fund and its tenure structure.

While there are no specific non-governmental organisations whose purpose is an engagement with and development of the housing policy, there are several NGOs whose services indirectly include housing assistance. For example, the Latvian Samaritan Union provides elderly care and manages a social centre

where housing is a fundamental service. Similarly, an NGO working with ex-prisoners tries to provide some housing assistance as one of the main reasons for recidivism is the lack of appropriate housing. The centre "Marta" works with victims of violence and provides an anonymous housing service to ensure temporary safety from the aggressor. There are also NGOs working with people who have a mental disability where appropriate housing is equally significant. The organisation "I Want to Help Refugees" offers its services to refugees and subsidiaries of international protection in their search for housing which is one of the most challenging aspects of the integration system. Thus, there is an entire eco-system of NGOs that do provide housing services but they are not systemically integrated. There are no specific alliances around the issue of housing.

In short, the governance of housing integration can be split up in three levels. On the national level, Ministries provide the strategic and policy guidance. Furthermore, there is financial support available to people wanting to buy a housing unit in the form of a state-guarantee which is practically available only to high-earners. On the municipal level, financial support is available mainly to low-income earners and other people in crisis situations which often are refugees and subsidiaries of international protection. The third level consists of a horizontal and dispersed NGO network engaged in the provision of services to their respective target groups.

7. Effects of outstanding events / crises / radical change

Two events/processes stand out with respect to housing and integration: 1) Europe's "migration crisis" of 2015 and 2) the influx of potential asylum seekers into Latvia across the Belarussian-Latvian border in summer 2021.

In 2015, Latvia agreed to accept 776 asylum seekers as part of European Union's relocation scheme (European Commission 2015), a number that was later reduced to 531 persons. Latvian government adopted an "Action Plan for Movement and Admission in Latvia of Persons who Need International Protection"[7] which included, among many other measures, assistance to the beneficiaries of international protection in finding permanent places of residence. This assistance meant providing refugees information on low-cost rental space and mentor's support in finding accommodation. Yet, these measures did not ease the problem of securing a suitable living space. This, as well as other hardships of inclusion, prompted many beneficiaries of international protection to leave Latvia for other EU countries. It is estimated that 90 percent of people who received international protection after their relocation to Latvia between 2016–2018 moved to other European countries (Lāce & Šuvajevs 2020). With very few refugees actually staying in Latvia, there was not much need to develop new housing-as-part-of-integration strategy either at municipal or national level. The difficult task of finding a place to live is a burden still left on the shoulders of refugees, including those returned to Latvia from other EU countries, and the NGOs who support them.

The influx of refugees into Latvia across the Belarussian-Latvian border in July-August 2021 highlighted the existing problems with housing and integration. With more than 340 people arriving in Latvia in less than a month (since August 10th when the state of emergency was introduced in Latvia, 1066 people have been prevented from crossing the Belarussian-Latvian border and entering the Latvian territory), the only accommodation centre for asylum seekers in Mucenieki was overfilled. The maximum capacity of the centre is 380 people if anti-Covid-19 measures are to be observed. When new asylum seekers arrived this summer, Centre's management was faced with an urgent need to find another accommodation for recent returnees from other EU countries as well as families who had already received protection status but had stayed on at Mucenieki due to the difficulties in finding a place to live. These people were moved to another Ministry of Interior building adjusted to house the newly arrived. It should be noted that neither the returnees, nor the recent receivers of protection status have

[7] https://likumi.lv/ta/en/en/id/278257-action-plan-for-movement-and-admission-in-latvia-of-persons-who-need-international-protection

an official right to stay at the Mucenieki accommodation centre for asylum seekers or any other facility meant for asylum seekers.

Moreover, Mucenieki centre has experienced two Covid-19 outbreaks recently. The first outbreak took place in April-May 2021 when 44 of the then 66 inhabitants of the centre got infected. The second one happened in August 2021, after the influx of asylum seekers through Belarus and claimed one life. At the time of writing this text, a comprehensive quarantine was in force at Mucenieki again, after some asylum seekers had been tested Covid-positive. The quarantine restrictions were introduced without sufficiently informing the inhabitants of the centre, which triggered protests by asylum seekers and resulted in a very negative media coverage that brought back the 2015 stereotyping of newcomers as unwelcome 'wild strangers', 'hooligans' and 'criminals' and, in general, a threat to the Latvian society.

The Covid-19 pandemic has further exacerbated the housing problem for refugees and holders of alternative status. Under conditions of anti-Covid restrictions it has been more difficult for the beneficiaries of international protection to search for flats, meet with landlords and sign rental contracts. It has proved especially challenging for the returnees from other EU countries to find a temporary accommodation in order to observe the quarantine. As far as housing is concerned, this group of people can rely only on the support of the NGO "I Want to Help Refugees" and volunteer activists.

8. Outlook

In 2022, the Ministry of Economy has planned to launch the first national housing strategy since the restoration of independence. It is planned to include a wholesale approach to housing policy, stipulating long-term goals and covering all levels of decision-making. Since so far there has been no systemic approach to the housing-integration nexus on the national level, it is hoped that the strategy will entail measures for ensuring that excluded, marginalised or otherwise disadvantaged groups have fair and smooth access to housing services. At the same time, the extent of detail and definition of responsibilities across several policy levels (national, municipal, civil sector) is not yet clear. It may very well be that the strategy pronounces lofty goals without specifying the means of attaining them or leaving open a wide room for interpretation.

At the same time, the outlook for housing-integration nexus on a political-municipal level looks promising: in 2020 Riga municipal elections, victory was claimed by parties that are ostensibly progressive and support more inclusionary practices which may extend in the field of housing too. The Municipal Commission of Housing is headed by the left-wing party and even though so far no major policy action has been announced, there is reason to believe that any future municipal housing strategy will be focused on making sure that vulnerable groups such as beneficiaries of international protection are provided affordable housing options.

Additionally, while Riga introduced a new neighbourhood strategy and map already in, it has finally gained traction as a recent proliferation of neighbourhood associations resulting in increased and changed conduct of public consultation process in 2020. In this context, Riga City Council has promoted a fund where associations can apply for funding which is administered by Integration Division and allows to submit projects addressing questions of integration. While these associations haven't been active in the domain of integration related to third country citizens and rather worked on other kinds of neighbourhood solidarity, they nevertheless offer a new platform for addressing the housing-integration nexus on the neighbourhood level, which is an opportunity at neighbourhoods with higher arrival rates.

Finally, the postsocialist transition has left a legacy of mass privatization in combination with fuzzy expectations towards institutions to take care of space around buildings and the buildings themselves. This has resulted in increased disparities in housing quality which recently developed funds fostered by the European Green Deal and Renovation Wave have a potential to increase even more. At the same time, there is also a significant push from state and municipal institutions to facilitate cooperation between homeowners and apartment-dwellers in the city for better collective decision making and ability

to apply for these funds. Thus, the challenge of mass renovation has the potential for both neighbourly integration on the level of buildings as well as serious fractions given the unequal sociomaterial conditions and difficulties with choosing which language to speak in meetings since both Latvian and Russian is not well spoken by all and English complicates the matters even more.

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