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# Young migrants, “integration” and the local: critical reflections from European stakeholders

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## Abstract

This article examines the complexities of integrating young adult migrants from non-EU countries into European contexts, advocating for a shift toward inclusive, locally informed, and reciprocal integration processes. It critiques state-centric, assimilationist frameworks that emphasize an imagined national identity and Western norms of youth transitions, neglecting local nuances and diverse migrant experiences. Through findings from a European Delphi study engaging 114 stakeholders from seven European countries, including migrant youth organisations, also represented by stakeholders with a migration background, the study highlights the need for a dynamic, process-oriented approach to integration. This approach prioritizes mutual adjustments between migrants and host communities, emphasizing flexibility, responsiveness, and local relevance. The study underscores the role of local actors and contexts in shaping integration policies, contrasting inclusivity at the local level with exclusionary national frameworks. Stakeholders emphasized the harmful impact of state-imposed policies and the importance of youth groups and migrant organizations as active contributors to policy development. The research proposes tailored solutions to address vulnerabilities and calls for long-term, multi-level governance that values the lived experiences of young migrants. Utilizing a two-stage Delphi methodology, the study facilitated anonymous stakeholder dialogue across seven European countries, yielding consensus on key integration challenges and innovative policy recommendations. By integrating diverse perspectives and recognizing young migrants as co-creators of their futures, this article advances debates on migration and integration, advocating for policies that are equitable, inclusive, and grounded in local realities.

**Keywords** Non-EU young migrants, Integration, Local, Stakeholders, Delphi study

## Introduction

Over the last decade, the EU has received increased numbers of migrants<sup>1</sup> from third

<sup>1</sup> In this paper, whenever we talk about “migrants” we refer to relatively newly arrived young people who at some point entered Europe from a “third country” (i.e. non-intra-European migration). “Local populations” include anyone resident in Europe for an extended time. We acknowledge that these categorizations are often used in a state centric way, can reinforce disidentifications, and are contested and challenged (Rogaly, 2020). So, while we use these terms for their pragmatic usefulness in conducting a Delphi survey across several European countries, it is crucial to recognise

countries, triggering heightened anxieties over migrant “integration”. The concept of “integration” is highly contested, not least because it is often mobilized for political and populist ends, contributing to the criminalization of humanitarianism and the violent policing of borders (Dadusc & Mudu, 2022; Jeandesboz & Pallister-Wilkins, 2016; Serpa, 2023). Consequently, the notion of “integration” has been problematized and critiqued with scholars highlighting racializing and stigmatising tendencies (see Schinkel, 2018) and advocating for alternative language and conceptualisations, such as belonging, identifications and interdependencies for example (Delanty et al., 2008; Wessendorf, 2019). However, despite ‘rising regional and international mobilities during the youthful phases of the life course for many social groups’ (Smith & Mills, 2018: 4), beyond unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) migrant “integration” is frequently seen as an ageless process. There is scant research on how young adult migrants’ experiences of “integration” vary and how they potentially disrupt the transition to adulthood, especially from a European perspective (on second generation youth in the US see Kasinitz et al., 2009; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). This group, aged 18 to 29, navigates international migration alongside significant life transitions. The literature on youth transitions, typically framed in normative Eurocentric terms, covers moving out of the family home, transitioning from education to work, forming long-term relationships, and starting families—a decidedly normative, ‘western’ conception of adulthood (Arnett, 2000; Cote, 2014).

Recent scholarship has nuanced these experiences, highlighting the impact of broader societal changes that have made youth transitions longer, riskier, and more complex, especially for marginalised, working-class youth (Arnett, 2000; Furlong and Cartmel, 2006; MacDonald & Marston, 2005). However, the complex transitions of migrant youth in Europe, often diverging from these norms, have received little attention to date. Research comparing the experiences of youth transition between new (“migrant”) and longer term (“local”) populations is severely lacking. Furthermore, analyses of youth transitions *and* migrant “integration” have largely overlooked the importance of local contexts, focusing instead on national frameworks, aggregate and macro datasets that can flatten differences and mask local divergences. When locality is considered, it is often seen as a mere backdrop of opportunities or constraints (e.g. in housing and labour markets), not as a complex and dynamic web of social interdependencies, multiplicities and ambivalences that shape migration experiences (Tazzioli, 2020). Recent research highlights the dissonance between national policies—frequently more hostile—and the more inclusive, welcoming local practices that often characterise civil society responses (Toğral Koca, 2022). Going further, Ida Danewid argues that there is a need to move beyond an ‘impoverished political imagination which regards the state as the horizon of possibility and writes off other visions as naive and deluded forms of utopianism’ (Danewid, 2023: 3). It follows that the local plays a key part in challenging dominant narratives and imaging alternatives— from Danewid’s call for ‘resisting racial capitalism’ through to everyday, quiet activisms (Chatterton & Pickerill, 2010; Pottinger, 2017).

This article aims to contribute to these debates through analysing a unique dataset from a European Delphi study among “integration” stakeholders working with migrant

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that the discursive use of categories such as “migrant” and “local population” can simplify complex realities, experiences and multiplicities in local sites (Tazzioli, 2019). And that such sites are ‘porous, lively and extroverted, rather than fixed and bounded’ (Rogaly, 2020, p. 20).

youth, including local youth and migrant organisations as well as regional and national policymakers. Young migrants also provided insights into the survey design in seeking to make the approach more inclusive and aid participation in it. We show how stakeholders from seven countries critically view contemporary, national “integration” policies as overly simplistic and detrimental for young people, and advocate for a more nuanced, processual, and reciprocal approach towards newly arrived migrant youth (Favell, 2019; Schinkel, 2018). This perspective contrasts sharply with dominant state policies and media narratives in Europe, suggesting a significant gap between the local dynamics of migrant reception and care, and a national politics of xenophobia and bordering (Hall, 2021; Mayblin & Turner, 2021).

We carry critiques of “integration” and youth transitions, along with calls for a “local turn”, into analysis of stakeholders’ criticisms of current policies toward young migrants. Drawing on the stakeholders’ responses to the Delphi study, we show widespread, cross-national preference for a model involving a multipartite process of reciprocal adjustments among young migrants, local populations, and institutions, responding directly to the needs of migrant youth and the local population alike.

The remainder of the paper is divided into four sections. The next section outlines the key debates within the fields of migrant integration, youth transitions and the local turn. Section three describes the methodology utilized in the study, the broader MIMY project<sup>2</sup> it was part of, and offers critical reflections on the limitations of the Delphi approach in engaging integration stakeholders working with migrant youth. Section four presents the key findings from the Delphi study—a mixed-method international survey with stakeholders across seven European countries—focusing on contested issues of integration policies and practices, with a special emphasis on young adult migrants. The final section concludes and positions the contribution within broader debates. Specifically, it offers critical reflections on the contradictions between local and national integration contexts and discourses, and the notable lack of attention towards migrant youth.

### **Migrant “integration”, the local turn and the neglect of youth**

Migrant “integration” is a highly contested issue among both scholars and policymakers. On one hand, there is a long-standing tradition, especially in American scholarly literature but also in Europe, of monitoring the economic and sociocultural positions of migrants (first and later generations) compared to other social groups, particularly the native population, to analyse incorporation processes (Pineau & Waters, 2016; Alba & Foner, 2014; Heckmann & Schnapper, 2003; Algan et al., 2012). On the other hand, many scholars argue this research is biased and contributes to the marginalization and stigmatization of migrant populations (Schinkel, 2018; Favell, 2019, 2022; Rytter, 2018; Ager & Strang, 2008; Skrobanek & Jobst, 2019). For example, it gives rise to divisive, binary notions of “us” versus “them”, “local” versus “migrant”, “native” versus “foreigner” etc. that belie the everyday interdependencies within which migrants are situated (Hall, 2021; Rogaly, 2020).

We focus particularly on three salient and normative aspects. First, the imagined idea of national “integration”. Schinkel (2018) argues that immigrant “integration” is a form of neocolonial knowledge production that segregates migrant populations (ethnic groups)

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<sup>2</sup>EMpowerment through liquid Integration of Migrant Youth in vulnerable conditions (MIMY), <https://mimy-project.eu/>

from white social populations. They are studied to the extent that they are “integrated” into various social spheres, while other social groups are exempt from integration research and policy. This distinction pre-marginalizes migrants, reinforcing ‘national integration’ as a divisive concept. One-sided discourses of ‘community cohesion’ and national integration for example, are premised on imagined notions of national identity and unity (e.g. ‘Polishness’, ‘Britishness’ etc.), or Europeanness (Krivonos and Nare, 2019) and are invariably framed in normative and moralizing terms. These debates also tend to proceed in an ahistorical fashion - invariably presenting a fantasy-laden and nostalgic picture of past national unity and integration juxtaposed with a contemporary migration-driven social malaise and fragmentation. Such narratives belie historical accounts and readings that emphasize class and racial conflict in the making and re-making of contemporary European nations (Virdee, 2014).

Second, there is often a disjuncture between abstract, national and racialized models of integration and the realities of localized organizational responses. National models driven by abstract state simplifications (Scott, 1998) and categorisations frequently overlook the complexities at the local level, where there is evidence of divergence from (and resistance to) national policies of bordering (Toğral Koca, 2022). Urban scholars also reveal generative and productive migrant infrastructures and entrepreneurialism at the micro level of the street (Hall, 2021), as well as the formation of new urban solidarities, collectives and resistances which have developed around the right to housing for example (Maestri, 2014; Grazioli, 2021). The hostile and assimilationist turn in many European societies has certainly not been uniformly adopted by local authorities and civil society actors. Rather, across Europe anti-fascist organising has led to new migrant activisms and solidarities (Hansen, 2020; Cantat, 2021), particularly within cities, which speak to notions of more positive urban encounters with difference and the generative potentialities of the urban margins (Darling & Wilson, 2016; Lancione, 2016). Poppelaars and Scholten (2008) describe national and local policies as ‘two worlds apart’, though later research indicates significant interactions between policy levels and a variety of local approaches (Dekker et al., 2015; Pisarevskaya, Van Breugel and Scholten, 2024). While national frameworks tend to homogenize and flatten difference while polarizing views, locally situated understandings offer potential for more nuanced and reality-congruent responses to emerge and dialogues to open up.

Third, discussions on immigrant integration often lack a youth perspective (Berger Cardoso et al., 2019). While attention has focused on European youth mobilities (see King & Williams, 2018), the complex transitions of migrant young people from the “Global South” in Europe are still somewhat disregarded or overlooked. This is significant as migration experiences for this group disrupt notions of a normative (western) transition from childhood to adulthood (Arnett, 2000). Academic and policy discourses have largely ignored the unique trajectories and non-linear transitions of young, racialized migrants in the process of becoming adults. For example, while the policy orthodoxy of ‘employability’ is emphasized in youth and urban governance globally, it is criticized for its normative and ideational foundations, which ignore empirical nuances and obscure structural inequalities (Fergusson & Yeates, 2014; Crisp & Powell 2017). Nonetheless, employability principles are applied universally across all youth demographics and “successful” youth transitions are benchmarked to a narrow reading of adulthood.

These reflections have significantly shaped our Delphi study design, selecting stakeholders to critically examine the premises of immigration integration models and instruments with specific regard to youth. Highlighting the similarities in identified needs of new as well as longer standing communities of young people, our empirical findings contribute to ongoing debates within migration research about the need for a demigrantization of issues traditionally discussed only in relation to the imagined figure of “the migrant” (Dahinden, 2016). Our findings also open the potential for dialogue across polarized positions and, at least in terms of our stakeholders, opportunities for re-thinking responses from local positionalities.

## Methodology

The Delphi research technique rooted in social sciences is a well-established approach used across various disciplines to answer a research question through the reaching of a consensus view across stakeholders as experts from various fields (academics, policy makers, journalists, representatives of NGOs etc.). Through a two-stage process, it allows for reflections among participants, who can reconsider their opinions based on the anonymized assessments and views of others (as the second survey bases its questions on the results of the first round) (cf. Linstone & Turoff, 1975; Landeta & Barrutia, 2011). A Delphi study is literally a panel of stakeholders who come virtually without knowing each other’s identities to arrive at an answer to a challenging question. Thus, a Delphi study could be considered a type of virtual meeting in which participants reach a collective understanding through a consensus-seeking approach (cf. Linstone & Turoff, 1975). The process is intended to lead to a convergence of responses and aims to produce ‘the most reliable consensus of opinion’ (Dalkey & Helmer, 1963; Helmer-Hirschberg, 1967). However, the Delphi method has been criticized during the last decades. Foth et al. (2016) especially emphasise the ongoing critique of the validity and reliability of Delphi studies as well as the definition of experts and their level of expertise (cf. Winkler & Moser, 2016).

While the Delphi method traditionally centres on expert opinion, a deliberate effort was made within the MIMY project to address the common critique of excluding the lived experiences of migrant youth. This was partially achieved by including stakeholders from migrant youth organizations—individuals with both professional and personal migration experiences—among the panel. Notably, 25 stakeholders self-identified as representing migrant youth organizations, and over 20% of Wave 2 respondents reported having a migration background themselves. This inclusion sought to bring the voices of young migrants into the consensus-building process, even if indirectly, through the lens of those working closely with or belonging to these communities. Moreover, attention was given to the role of NGOs—especially those led by or embedded in migrant communities—which are crucial actors in shaping and delivering integration policies at the local level. Many of the included stakeholders represented such organizations, providing grounded perspectives shaped by daily engagement with migrant youth in vulnerable conditions. We also sought input on the survey design from young people with experience of migration. Several peer researchers provided feedback on the earlier drafts of the Delphi survey, typically addressing issues around language and the relevance of lines of questioning in seeking to be inclusive. Future iterations of Delphi studies could go much further by directly involving young adult migrants as co-researchers or panel

participants, thereby enriching the process with first-hand lived experiences and contributing to a more inclusive and representative policy dialogue. This addresses one of the key criticisms of the Delphi approach—its reliance on narrowly defined “expertise”—and responds to calls for a broader conception of expertise that includes experiential and community-based knowledge (cf. Winkler & Moser, 2016).

To deal with this critique, our Delphi study within the MIMY project used a mixed-method approach in one combined research tool (cf. Linstone & Turoff, 1975; Landeta & Barrutia, 2011; Hilbert et al., 2009). It included a combination of standardized survey questions with numerical scales capturing the earlier findings of the MIMY project and open questions. This was addressed through an approach that recognised young people as experts on their own lives (Cahill, 2007), as well as the specific expertise and situated knowledge that resides within migrant youth organisations and migrant-led NGOs. These organisations were intentionally included in the Delphi panel to ensure that the perspectives shaping policy recommendations were grounded not only in institutional or academic expertise, but also in the lived realities of young migrants themselves. The Delphi study therefore involved a diverse panel of stakeholders, both national and predominantly local policy makers and policy users across partner countries within the MIMY project, which explicitly included migrant youth themselves and migrant youth organizations. The Delphi study aimed to juxtapose these variegated perspectives in a longitudinal dialogue. For the purposes of the cross-national survey, we defined a *policy maker* as a person who is responsible for policy strategy, framework, and the design of instruments. A *policy user*, we define as a person who is responsible for putting the policy into practice. *Instruments* linked to migrants are understood here as practices and tools which can be used to overcome challenges and to achieve aims.

Survey participants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling methods by national research teams in each of the seven partner countries: Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, Poland, Romania, Sweden, and the UK (England). Each team aimed to recruit a diverse panel of stakeholders with relevant expertise in youth integration, including representatives from local and national government, civil society organisations (especially NGOs), and advocacy or policy implementation roles. A total of 114 stakeholders participated in Wave 1, with 45 completing Wave 2, representing a retention rate of 39.5% (see Table 1). While we do not have the total number initially contacted across all countries, recruitment was guided by ensuring diversity of roles, regional balance, and direct experience with young adult migrants.

**Table 1** Number of stakeholders in wave 1 and 2 by country

Country	Wave 1	Wave 2	% of Wave 1
GERMANY	12	3	25.0
ITALY	17	8	47.1
LUXEMBOURG	8	7	87.5
POLAND	17	9	52.9
ROMANIA	17	8	47.1
SWEDEN	17	7	41.2
ENGLAND	15	3	20.0
Others	11	0	0.0
Total	114	45	39.5

Source: The MIMY Project Delphi Study (2022)



Given the study's emphasis on *localised integration*, we intentionally prioritised stakeholders working at the local and subnational levels (e.g. municipal officers, youth service providers, local NGO representatives), while still including national-level actors involved in strategy or policymaking. This resulted in a predominantly local-level perspective, but not exclusively. The stakeholder roles were varied: in Wave 1, 25 participants were from migrant youth organisations, 29 were policy users (i.e. implementers), 40 were in advocacy roles, 18 in lobbying, and 17 identified as both policy makers and users. Only 9 participants identified solely as policy makers. This focus was aligned with the project's interest in capturing grounded, context-specific understandings of integration as it plays out in real-life settings.

Regarding the country sample, the selection intentionally included a mix of countries with different migration profiles—ranging from long-standing immigration countries (e.g. Germany, UK, Sweden), to more recent or transitional immigration contexts (e.g. Poland, Romania, Luxembourg), some of which have traditionally been emigration countries. This comparative perspective aimed to uncover both shared challenges and context-specific dynamics in how integration policies for young migrants are shaped and implemented. It also enabled the study to interrogate how local actors respond differently depending on national discourses, legal frameworks, and demographic realities.

On the question of differences between stakeholder groups, the data showed broad agreement on some issues—such as the importance of local services and NGOs—but also divergence. For example, while many stakeholders supported the role of NGOs in supporting young migrants, this belief was especially strong among those working within NGOs and advocacy. Policy users, too, emphasized practical challenges at the local level and the importance of flexible funding. Where clear divergences emerged, they are noted in the results section.

As for the young migrant stakeholders, while the Delphi panel did not directly include young migrants as individuals, it did include 25 stakeholders affiliated with migrant youth organisations, many of whom were themselves migrants with first-hand experience. Among all respondents, 23 reported personal migration experience (i.e. they had themselves migrated across borders), and these perspectives were considered essential in bringing lived experience into the expert discussion. While we did not systematically cross-tabulate migration background with organisational type, the inclusion of migrant-led organisations and stakeholders with migration experience was a deliberate strategy to amplify marginalised voices in shaping integration policy.

This study unfolded over two phases, from December 2021 to September 2022, engaging stakeholders in a year-long, anonymous online dialogue to move toward some kind of broad consensus on integration policies for young adult migrants (18–29). Utilizing a CAWI approach, the surveys were distributed in six languages, gathering insights into existing policy models, challenges to migrant integration, and potential solutions. The first phase laid the groundwork for discussion, while the second phase sought to refine and consolidate these insights into an emergent policy framework emphasizing *reciprocal integration*.

In Wave 1, 63% of stakeholders participating in the survey were women ( $n = 72$ ), with 35 men and 7 preferring not to disclose their gender. The average age of respondents was around 40.

Wave 2 involved a participation of 68% women ( $n = 31$ ), 12 men, and 2 undisclosed, with over 20% having migration experience ( $n = 10$ ; 22%). The breakdown included 10 policy makers and advisers, 14 policy users and advocates, 13 individuals in both roles, and 8 observers. Landeta and Barrutia (2011) suggest that higher engagement occurs when experts feel they can impact the discussion, which varied by country based on the perceived urgency of integrating young third-country nationals.

As noted above, the Delphi survey followed a two-wave design, in which the results of Wave 1 directly informed the development of Wave 2. In the first wave, a combination of closed questions (using Likert scales) and open-ended questions was used to gather both quantitative and qualitative insights on key issues relating to the integration of young adult migrants. The results of the closed questions were analysed to identify consensus or divergence among stakeholder groups on topics such as integration barriers, the role of actors, and levels of policy-making. In Wave 2, several of these closed questions were re-asked to confirm or deepen the findings (e.g. *“Barriers to integration often exist even where services are available”* [Wave 1, Q1.1; re-asked in Wave 2, Q1.1]), and others were reformulated to reflect themes that emerged in open responses (e.g. *“At what level should ‘living together’ policy be implemented?”* [Wave 2, Q3.2], which built on Wave 1 discussions about decentralisation).

The open-ended responses from Wave 1 were thematically coded, and key themes—such as relational barriers (e.g. *“What kind of challenges do young adult migrants face in their everyday interactions with local populations?”* [Wave 1, Q2.1]), differential treatment of migrant groups (e.g. *“How do you view the different treatment of Ukrainian and Syrian refugees?”* [Wave 2, Q4.1]), and the importance of local-level actors—were used to shape the open questions in Wave 2. Not all open responses were re-used, but representative themes that appeared across countries or stakeholder types were prioritised. For instance, questions in Wave 2 regarding the *allocation of resources* (Q3.3) and the *roles of actors in decision-making* (Q3.1) were directly informed by themes that emerged in qualitative answers to Wave 1’s open questions on governance. Wave 2 thus served to validate, refine, and deepen the findings from Wave 1, rather than simply repeating the same questions.

In the survey, participants responded to statements with a number between 1 and 5 where 1 represented ‘completely disagree’ and 5 represented ‘completely agree’, so the higher the number the more the participants agreed with the statement. Below we present the combined average numbers of the stakeholders’ responses, where an aggregate average of 3 indicates that the participants neither agree nor disagree.

### Key insights from the Delphi survey

In the first round of the Delphi study, most stakeholders (73 out of 114; agree 51 and strongly agree 22) concurred to statements suggesting that policies for integrating young migrants from third countries should foster an ongoing, open-ended process of coexistence, addressing the needs of diverse young migrant groups and the young local population alike (see Table 2).

In the sections below, we analyse, step by step, the different factors and conditions that local stakeholders find necessary for integration policies to address the needs of young adult migrants and the local youth population alike. We begin with factors relating to decision making power since this sets the framework for how integration issues can be



**Table 2** Stakeholder agreement on Open-Ended coexistence policies for young migrants (Delphi study, wave 1)

Response	Count	Percentage
Agreed (scores 4 and 5)	73	64.04%
• Agree (score 4)	51	44.74%
• Strongly Agree (score 5)	22	19.30%
Neutral or Disagreed (scores 1–3)	41	35.96%
Total	114	100%

Source: own elaboration

approached. Then we discuss factors that the stakeholders highlight as central to address the needs of diverse young migrant groups and the young local population alike.

### Towards reciprocal integration? Power, scale and policy actors

In Wave 1 of the Delphi study, stakeholders collectively defined *reciprocal integration* as an open-ended, mutual process of “living together,” in which both young adult migrants and members of the local population engage in continuous adaptation, dialogue, and shared responsibility. Rather than viewing integration as a one-way process requiring migrants to assimilate into a dominant host society, stakeholders emphasised relational interdependence—stressing that successful integration demands active involvement, openness, and transformation from all actors involved, including institutions. This definition also acknowledged the temporal and contextual nature of integration, unfolding over time and shaped by specific local realities, policy environments, and social dynamics. The term *reciprocal* was used deliberately to challenge hierarchical and assimilationist models, instead aligning with inclusive, place-based practices of civic participation and mutual recognition.

Building on this foundation, in Wave 2 the concept of *living together* was further developed and operationalised as a reciprocal, dynamic process involving both young adult migrants and local populations in practices of mutual adaptation, interaction, and shared belonging. It encompassed both relational dimensions—such as intercultural exchange, mutual respect, and everyday social contact—and structural dimensions, including equitable access to education, employment, housing, and services at the local level. Stakeholders consistently highlighted that *living together* is not a one-sided integration of migrants into a static host society, but a co-produced, evolving process grounded in local encounters and supported by inclusive governance frameworks. The active involvement of migrant youth in decision-making, alongside the pivotal role of NGOs—particularly migrant-led ones—was seen as central to enabling this approach. Importantly, *living together* was framed not as a policy endpoint, but as an ongoing, adaptive practice of cohabitation, civic participation, and shared futures.

The first wave of the survey shows how stakeholders believe that primary obstacles to promoting a dynamic, open-ended, and non-linear approach to the integration of young adults—based on the principle of coexistence between migrants and the local population—stem primarily from the power and influence of populist governments and the media, including social media (Table 3). Stakeholders were firmly of the belief that local NGOs and services are the most effective means of meeting the needs of young adult migrants. They also recognized the importance of engaging the local population through various activities and events related to young adult migrants, such as intercultural

**Table 3** Factors impacting the shape of policy addressing migrant youth (Wave 1)

	Benchmark	UK	Romania	Luxembourg	Germany	Sweden	Italy	Poland	Oth- ers
Popu- list gov- ern- ment in power	4.55	4.53	4.47	4.50	4.83	4.63	4.24	4.56	4.82
Influ- ence of all kinds of media, incl. social media	4.13	4.47	4.06	4.00	4.33	4.06	4.06	4.31	3.64
Finan- cial crisis	4.00	4.14	4.35	3.25	4.17	4.12	3.76	3.94	3.91
Fund- ing of NGOs (and lim- ited or lack of fund- ing)	3.95	4.33	4.00	3.50	4.70	3.88	3.25	4.18	3.82
Eco- nomic slow- down	3.90	4.21	4.00	3.38	4.27	3.94	3.71	4.06	3.36
Situa- tion in coun- tries of origin	3.70	4.73	4.12	3.88	3.50	3.50	3.35	3.19	3.27
Pan- demic	3.45	3.93	3.44	2.63	4.25	3.20	3.29	3.47	3.09

Source: The MIMY Project Delphi Study (2021)

Q: Indicate which factors, in your opinion, impact the shape of a policy linked to migrants. Then indicate to what extent those factors impact the shape of a policy linked to migrants

festivals, community sports initiatives, joint workshops, and mentoring programmes. Below, we discuss these findings in more detail.

We first look at the factors local stakeholders identify as shaping integration policy the most. This is a crucial starting point, since these factors need to be identified to know what factors to address first if one wants to accomplish change in the field of youth integration.

The Delphi results show how stakeholders roughly assessed the growing influence of far-right populism and national-level political discourse on shaping integration narratives and policy. Respondents in several countries noted that national frameworks often reflect a narrow, assimilationist understanding of integration, frequently driven by politicised and racialised narratives (*a la* Schinkel (2018) and others discussed above). For instance, many stakeholders described how national media and political actors

contribute to framing migrants—particularly young, racialised migrants from non-European countries—as cultural outsiders or threats to an imagined social cohesion and national unity. This perception was particularly strong in responses from Germany and the UK, where the influence of populist governments and media was rated among the highest (Germany:  $M = 4.83$ ; UK:  $M = 4.73$ ). One stakeholder commented: “Policies are increasingly shaped by fear and nationalism, not by the lived realities of local communities or the needs of migrants.” These findings reflect a broader concern among respondents that national integration models are often disconnected from both the complexity of migrant lives and the more inclusive practices seen at the local level (see Togral Koca, 2022).

The study further aimed to determine the appropriate level for making and implementing decisions on integration as a policy of reciprocal coexistence between migrants and the local population. We discovered (Table 4) that stakeholders, regardless of their role, considered national (36) and subnational and local levels (35) of policymaking equally appropriate for decision making on integration.

In their open answers, stakeholders highlighted the importance of relevant and appropriate legislative provisions and resources at the national level, which could then be implemented and disseminated to the subnational and local levels. For example, a stakeholder from Sweden pointed out that while national steering mechanisms are essential to ensure consistency, it is municipalities that apply and adapt these policies to local realities—such as providing tailored education and employment support for newly arrived young migrants. Similarly, a respondent from England emphasised that national frameworks must be flexible enough to accommodate the specific needs of diverse local communities, particularly where young migrants are navigating fragmented service systems. This approach ensures that relevant policies and support directly reach young adult migrants living in various communities, particularly where they are deemed most “vulnerable”. Stakeholders emphasized that this multi-level strategy is crucial for addressing the complex challenges faced by young migrants, allowing for more tailored and effective integration measures that consider the specific needs and circumstances at the community level.

**Table 4** Level of policy decision-making on integration (Wave 2)

Category	Policy makers and advisory* (n = 10)	Policy users and advocacy** (n = 14)	Both policy makers and users*** (n = 13)	Observers**** (n = 8)	Total
National	7	10	11	8	36
Subnational and local	9	9	9	8	35
International	6	8	6	4	24

\* Policy makers design and implement policy frameworks and strategies, including government officials, legislators, and administrators. Advisory stakeholders, such as researchers and analysts, provide expertise and guidance to shape these policies

\*\* Policy users implement and apply policies on the ground, including local service providers, NGOs, and educators. Advocacy stakeholders, such as activists and lobby groups, promote policy change and raise awareness of key issues

\*\*\* Some stakeholders serve as both policy makers and users, designing policies while also implementing them. Examples include municipal authorities or NGO leaders who craft strategies and directly deliver services

\*\*\*\* Observers are stakeholders who analyse and monitor policies without direct involvement in their creation or implementation. Examples include academics, researchers, and independent organizations

Source: The MIMY Project Delphi Study (2022)

Q: Please say, at what level ‘living together’ decisions should be made? You can select more than one

**Table 5** Level of implementation of integration policy (Wave 2)

Category	Policy makers and advisory (n = 10)	Policy users and advocacy (n = 14)	Both policy makers and users (n = 13)	Observers (n = 8)	Total
Subnational and local	9	12	11	8	40
National	7	11	9	8	35
International	5	3	4	4	16

Source: The MIMY Project Delphi Study (2022)

Q: Please say, at what level 'living together' policy should be implemented? You can select more than one

**Table 6** Role of various actors in policy-making on integration (Wave 2)

Category	Policy makers and advisory (n = 10)	Policy users and advocacy (n = 14)	Both policy makers and users (n = 13)	Observers (n = 8)	Total
Subnational and local authorities	8	12	12	6	38
NGOs	4	9	12	5	30
Migrant young people	4	9	11	4	28
Executive institutions	7	7	4	5	23
Legislative branches	5	7	3	4	19
Consulting & advocacy institutions	2	7	6	4	19

Source: The MIMY Project Delphi Study (2022)

Q: Who should have a role/power in decision-making in relation to the governance of integration as 'living together' policy?

*(...) there must be resources and legislative provisions that allow this (therefore international and national legitimacy is desirable) but it is the territories of living, living and working that make the difference with their specificities and resources [a stakeholder from England].*

*(...) newly arrived young people tend to move around quite a bit within the country. It would be very strange if different regions had different approaches and rules. Then each region and municipality need to be the ones who apply the policy and activate it. In order to bring about change (...) national steering mechanisms can both put pressure on but also facilitate a change locally [a stakeholder from Sweden].*

These comments underscore the crucial role of scale in decision making as well as implementation of integration policy. Table 5 below highlights a consensus among the stakeholders for a multi-layered approach to policy implementation, emphasizing the need for local and subnational strategies (40) tailored to specific community contexts, while still recognizing the role of national frameworks (35) in providing overarching support and direction.

Stakeholders provided insights into the roles various actors play in the policymaking process regarding the integration of migrants and the local population, which was conceived not merely as coexistence, but as a process of reciprocal engagement, mutual adaptation, and the fostering of shared civic participation. The consensus pointed to subnational and local authorities—including municipalities, local governments, and labour offices—as being instrumental, receiving the most feedback (38 replies) especially from a diverse group comprising policy users, advocates, and a combination of policymakers and users (cf. Table 6). This was closely followed by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) with 30 mentions and young migrants themselves, who received 28 replies, underscoring their significant yet underutilized potential in shaping integration policies.

This feedback suggests a strong preference among stakeholders for actively involving migrant youth in the policymaking process, highlighting a gap in their current representation and engagement. To address this, stakeholders proposed concrete measures such as creating structured consultation mechanisms with migrant youth organisations, including youth advisory boards at municipal levels, co-designing local integration strategies with young migrants, and offering leadership training and mentoring programmes that enable migrant youth to participate meaningfully in governance processes. These suggestions emphasise not only inclusion, but “empowerment”—ensuring that migrant youth are recognised as active agents in shaping the policies that affect their lives. The emphasis on local and subnational authorities underlines the importance of grassroots and community-level involvement in developing and implementing integration strategies. It points towards a growing acknowledgment of the need for policies that are not only inclusive of but also shaped by the voices and experiences of young migrants, and youth more broadly. The findings underscore the critical role of collaboration across various levels of governance and the inclusion of directly affected individuals in creating effective and responsive integration policies. This holistic approach aims to foster a more inclusive and participatory environment in the policy-making arena, recognizing the unique contributions and perspectives of migrant youth alongside established institutions and organizations. Yet, at the same time challenging and disrupting predominant power dynamics.

Stakeholders specifically emphasized the need to shift the focus of decision-making towards intermediate bodies. They advocated for empowering non-political organizations and enhancing the role of public and citizen consultations. This approach suggests a broader, more inclusive strategy for integrating migrants, one that values input from a variety of stakeholders beyond traditional political entities and state simplifications. By amplifying the voices of civil society and engaging citizens directly in the consultation process, the stakeholders argue for a more democratic, nuanced, participatory approach to integration policy development, ensuring that the diverse needs and perspectives of both migrants *and* local communities are adequately represented and addressed.

During the second phase of the Delphi study, stakeholders were invited to openly discuss the necessity for adjustments concerning the distribution of power within their respective areas of expertise. This sought to uncover insights into creating more responsive and adaptable frameworks that recognize and leverage the contributions of all stakeholders, including migrant communities, in shaping integration policies. Prominent narratives of decentralization, migrant youth inclusion and learning from experience are captured in the qualitative responses below.

*A shift in decision-making to include migrant youth - whatever their status and local community organizations where they live. Migrant youth should not be seen as a problem to be solved but recognized for the expertise and experience they bring which can and does enhance local communities. [a stakeholder from England]*

*It should be a more decentralized structure putting first the local community and in correlation with national and European distribution of power. There is no systematic and structured channels of participation and dialogue [a stakeholder from Romania].*

Stakeholders highlighted key aspects to improve the integration policy framework: ensuring diverse international representation, incorporating migrant youth in decision-making, emphasizing local context in policy decisions, and recognizing the third sector's and public-private partnerships' roles in policy development. These recommendations advocate for inclusive, decentralized, and collaborative policy-making approaches, stressing the importance of diverse perspectives and local specificity in creating effective and sustainable integration strategies. Responses here emphasize the contradictions between local initiatives from the ground and national rhetoric.

In their qualitative feedback, stakeholders noted that subnational and local institutions, including local governments, should be granted more authority in the allocation of funds (Table 7). They observed a need for increased funding locally which was deemed to play a crucial role in facilitating the integration process. Stakeholders also emphasized the necessity for more sustainable, long-term structural resources across all societal levels to support comprehensive community building.

*The state budget policy should include funds for local government activities in this area (budgets, full-time jobs). Local governments should have greater decision-making power when allocating this pool of funds and the possibility of quick adaptation (reallocation) to changing circumstances. [a stakeholder from Poland]*

*A reprioritization and more long-term resources are needed for the sustainable construction of society at all levels. Fewer short projects. [a stakeholder from Sweden]*

Stakeholders emphasised that resources for integration should be allocated primarily at the subnational and local levels, where integration takes place in practice, and where local actors are best positioned to respond to evolving needs. They proposed a range of concrete activities, including long-term funding for integration officers, intercultural mediators, local language and job-readiness programmes, and support for inclusive community initiatives.

To sum up, in this section, we have seen how stakeholders emphasize the importance of a cohesive national framework for integration policies that provides flexibility for local adaptation. Local authorities, such as municipalities and labour offices, were identified as crucial actors in implementing and customizing policies to fit the unique needs of their communities. NGOs and young migrants were also highlighted as key contributors, though the potential of young migrants in policymaking remains underutilized. Stakeholders called for participatory decision-making processes that include young migrants' perspectives, ensuring that policies are both relevant and responsive to their lived experiences.

We have also seen how decentralization and collaboration are central to effective integration policymaking. Stakeholders advocated for shifting decision-making power to

**Table 7** An allocation of resources for integration (Wave 2)

Category	Policy makers and advisory (n = 10)	Policy users and advocacy (n = 14)	Both policy makers and users (n = 13)	Observers (n = 8)	Total
Subnational and local	8	14	11	8	41
National	3	9	9	5	26
International	3	5	4	2	14

Source: The MIMY Project Delphi Study (2022)

Q: Where should resources lie in relation to the governance of 'living together' policy?



local communities while fostering coordination across national and international levels. They underscored the role of non-political organizations, public consultations, and partnerships with third-sector actors in creating inclusive and innovative strategies. Additionally, the need for sustainable, long-term funding for local governments was highlighted as essential for addressing integration challenges effectively. Best practices, such as establishing one-stop centres and coordinated support systems, demonstrate the potential for streamlined and collaborative approaches to integration. Overall, stakeholders championed an inclusive, adaptive, and locally driven approach that values the contributions of diverse actors, including young migrants.

### Integration as reciprocal process: policy priorities, issues and barriers

After establishing where the stakeholders believe the power to make decision currently lies— and where it should lie— we turn to the issues they identified as central to addressing the needs of both young adult migrants and the local youth population. Importantly, the stakeholders identify a strong convergence between the needs of newly arrived and long-term residents in local communities. We first look at the policy areas stakeholders identify as crucial for integration as a reciprocal process.

Stakeholders identified essential policy areas crucial for fostering integration as a mutual coexistence of migrants and the local population (cf. Table 8). These areas include education (43 mentions), employment (39 mentions), equality, diversity, and inclusion (38 mentions), migration, asylum, integration (35 mentions), and housing (33 mentions).

In the Delphi study, stakeholders were queried about structural and relational barriers affecting the integration of migrants and local populations, based on a predefined list of barriers from the MIMY project's prior research. The most commonly identified relational barriers to migrants included language acquisition (39 stakeholders out of 45), meaningful engagement with the receiving society (36/45), and establishing local social networks and receiving intercultural support (each 34/45). For the local population, the primary relational barriers were intercultural exchange/diversity (36/45), mutual knowledge (34/45), and respect (32/45).

According to the stakeholders, the top structural barriers for young migrants were the lack of access to essential resources like jobs, education, and housing (36/45), inadequate

**Table 8** Policy areas needed to be engaged to affect change in young migrant and local population integration policy (Wave 2)

Category	Policy makers and advisory (n = 10)	Policy users and advocacy (n = 14)	Both policy makers and users (n = 13)	Observers (n = 8)	Total
Education	10 (1)	14 (1)	12 (1)	7 (1)	43
Employment	9 (2)	12 (3)	12 (1)	6 (2)	39
Equality, Diversity & Inclusion	7 (3)	12 (2)	12 (1)	7 (1)	38
Migration/Asylum/Integration	7 (3)	11 (3)	11 (2)	6 (2)	35
Housing	5	11 (3)	11 (2)	6 (2)	33
Health	6	11 (3)	8	4 (3)	29
Youth Policy	6	10	7	4 (3)	27
Leisure/Sports/Recreation	4	9	10 (3)	2	25
Family affairs	5	9	5	4 (3)	23

Source: The MIMY Project Delphi Study (2022)

Q: What policy areas need to be engaged to affect change in young migrant and local population 'living together' policy?

**Table 9** Main barriers on the side of young adult migrants in integration as a reciprocal process including both migrants and local population

On the side of young adult migrants	<i>n</i>
Lack of access to resources (jobs, education, housing, services)	36
Lack of suitable accommodation (for asylum seekers lack of privacy in reception centres)	32
Trauma after spells in refugee camps or associated with passage/conflict in country of origin	30
Xenophobia, racism, discrimination, hostility	28
Poverty	24
Lack of social networks	23
Lack of job and training offers	22
Lack of legal documents	22
Non recognition of foreign documents (e.g. education)	21
Lack of/limited projects and services for young adults	20
Lack of local action plan for youth service	19
Limited places for language acquisition	19
Lack of/limited civic project developments	17

Source: The MIMY Project Delphi Study (2022)

Q: Living together of young migrants and local populations is about a reciprocal process that includes everybody

Please indicate the main barriers to the implementation of this approach at the LOCAL level of policy and structures

**Table 10** Main barriers on the side of *local population* in integration as a reciprocal process including both migrants and local population

On the side of local population	<i>n</i>
Lack of suitable and affordable accommodation for young people	27
Lack of access to resources (jobs, education, housing, services)	26
Xenophobia, racism, discrimination, hostility	26
Lack of local action plan for youth service	21
Lack of volunteers and civic engagement	20
Poverty	20
Lack of/limited civic project developments	18
Lack of job and training offers	18
Lack of social networks	16
Lack of/limited projects and services for young adults	14
Lack of/limited NGO services	11
Lack of/limited job counselling	9

Source: The MIMY Project Delphi Study (2022)

Q: Living together of young migrants and local populations is about a reciprocal process that includes everybody

Please indicate the main barriers to the implementation of this approach at the LOCAL level of policy and structures

accommodation, particularly for asylum seekers (32/45), and trauma from experiences in refugee camps or conflict zones, along with xenophobia, racism, discrimination, and hostility (both 30/45) (Tables 9 and 10). The local population faced similar structural barriers in terms of intercultural exchange/diversity, mutual knowledge, and respect. This feedback underscores the multifaceted nature of integration challenges, highlighting the need for comprehensive strategies to address both relational and structural barriers in all their local nuance.

The top structural barriers from the local population's perspective in achieving reciprocal integration with young migrants, as identified in the Delphi study, were the lack of suitable and affordable accommodation for young people (27 mentions) and limited access to resources such as jobs, education, housing, and services (26 mentions). Additionally, xenophobia, racism, discrimination, and hostility were equally prominent, reflecting societal attitudes that hinder integration (26 mentions). Other significant

barriers included the absence of local action plans for youth services (21 mentions), as well as insufficient volunteer involvement and civic engagement (20 mentions), pointing to a need for more grassroots support. Economic constraints like poverty (20 mentions) and the lack of job and training offers (18 mentions) further emphasize systemic challenges. Limited development of civic projects (18 mentions), social networks (16 mentions), and targeted projects or services for young adults (14 mentions) highlight gaps in community and institutional support. Lastly, the lack of NGO services (11 mentions) and job counselling opportunities (9 mentions) underscore areas where local organizations and initiatives need bolstering to better support integration. These findings collectively indicate a need for structural and community-level reforms to create an inclusive and supportive local environment for young migrants.

Stakeholders shared best practice examples from their regions that exemplify effective governance of integration. Central to these narratives was the creation and fostering of spaces and settings for dialogue which underscored the significance of ongoing communication.

*We worked in X project, which opened the way for the local community to change its view of who the newcomers are and opening the way for them to communicate and learn about the experiences, realities and capabilities of these people. It also created a movement in the host municipality to integrate these people by listening to them first and trying to find a common language for communication. [a stakeholder from Luxembourg]*

*My place encourages interactions between locals and foreigners, strengthens links between local institutions and migrant communities, and develops local support networks through the involvement of cultural mediators, interpreters and volunteers. [an anonymous stakeholder]*

Terms like “common language”, “cultural mediators” etc. were recurrent in the analysis as was the value afforded to voluntary and community groups operating within this space. Indeed, services provided by such organisations were invariably identified as having the most significant impact on policies affecting migrants and the local population. Stakeholders also responded to questions of structural barriers that complicate their work with youth integration (Table 11).

The first section of the Wave 1 survey presented several statements regarding potential barriers to integration (see Table 11). Stakeholders’ responses to these statements suggest that they believe that barriers to integration persist, even in the presence of available services, with particularly strong concerns expressed by participants from England (UK) ( $M = 4.73$ ) and Luxembourg ( $M = 4.50$ ), against an average of  $M = 4.35$  among all respondents. Stakeholders also largely agreed (scores above 4.0) that circular migration patterns are not largely influenced by existing integrative practices. The isolation of migrants in rural areas and their limited interaction with locals also emerged as a major issue, particularly noted by stakeholders from England (UK) and Romania, with scores exceeding 4.0. The challenge of incorporating migrant histories into urban contexts in non-traditional ways was especially highlighted by Luxembourgish stakeholders, with average scores ranging from 3.92 to 3.66.

Notably, the stakeholders gave the lowest score (slightly over 2.5, which indicates that they neither agree nor disagree) to the statement that the ‘integration process promotes

**Table 11** Hypotheses testing by country (Wave 1)

	Benchmark	Germany	Italy	Luxembourg	Poland	Romania	Sweden	UK	Others
Barriers to integration often exist even where services are available	4.35	4.27	4.31	4.50	4.19	4.35	4.27	4.73	4.18
Circular migration– back and forth moves - takes place even where integrative practices are in place in a destination country	3.92	4.20	4.14	4.00	4.00	3.93	3.80	3.73	3.73
Young migrants in rural and peripheral areas feel isolated and pressured to assimilate to fit into the local population	3.71	3.75	3.40	3.88	3.60	4.00	3.50	4.07	3.33
In urban contexts the histories of migration are complex and diverse and young migrant adults can embed their pathways and lifestyles in a non-conformist way to the local population	3.66	3.82	3.27	4.00	3.94	3.88	3.31	3.67	3.60
Young migrant adults living in rural and peripheral areas have good contact with locals, but have less support services available to them and less economic opportunities	3.66	3.17	3.94	3.13	3.46	3.88	4.11	4.00	3.25
The integration process promotes assimilation practices rather than integrative activities	3.15	3.27	3.13	2.88	2.67	3.44	3.00	3.71	2.89

Source: The MIMY Project Delphi Study (2021)

assimilation practices'. We interpret this as a representation of a variation among the participants in relation to their views on whether integration processes in their local contexts among young migrants actually lead to integration (understood as an ongoing, open-ended process of coexistence) rather than assimilation (cf. Table 11). One last issue that emerged from the Delphi study, which is important to highlight to get a full picture of what the stakeholders found central for integration to occur, was that migrants should be equally treated.

In the second wave of the Delphi study, we sought opinions from participants across seven European countries regarding the differential treatment observed towards various groups of migrants, exemplified by the differing responses to Ukrainian refugees in 2022 compared to Syrian refugees in 2015 within several European nations. An overwhelming majority of stakeholders advocated for equal treatment of all war refugees, irrespective of their nationality or religion, echoing a call for universal standards in refugee support. Through open-ended queries, stakeholders further elaborated on their views, underscoring the importance of relative uniformity in humanitarian response and the need to transcend geopolitical biases to uphold the dignity and rights of every individual fleeing conflict.

*Migrants should be treated equally within the migrant group. Refugees should be treated equally within the refugee group. [anonymous stakeholder]*

*Equal does not mean the same e.g. the number of hours of a language course will be different, the degree of discrimination that should be counteracted with different methods will also be different. [anonymous stakeholder]*

*Different treatment only breeds racism between different groups in society. [anonymous stakeholder]*

*It is terribly tough to work with non-European people from war-torn areas and see that society embraces other people because of the principle of closeness. [anonymous stakeholder]*

This feedback indicates a consensus among the respondents for more equitable and consistent policies that recognize the shared vulnerabilities of refugees, regardless of their origin, advocating for an approach that is both compassionate and uniform across different migrant crises.

In their qualitative responses, stakeholders discussed the issue of varying legal statuses, with a particular focus on the challenges associated with temporary residence permits. They highlighted the complexities and uncertainties that such permits introduce for migrants, affecting their ability to integrate and settle in host communities effectively.

*The problem is due to the existence of two different legal frameworks: temporary protection status or status of applicant for international protection. [anonymous stakeholder]*

*How can we request integration when we grant temporary residence permits? We are only putting people in a very stressful and uncertain situation and that creates neither conditions nor trust and makes it impossible for people to create a life for themselves in the new country. [anonymous stakeholder]*

These comments underline the need for a more nuanced understanding of how legal frameworks and policies can impact the lived experiences of migrants, suggesting a

re-evaluation of temporary permits to ensure they support rather than hinder integration processes. This discussion aligns with emerging research that calls for more comprehensive and empathetic approaches to migration management.

In summarizing the outcomes of Wave 2 of the Delphi study, it became evident that stakeholders unanimously advocate for the significant consideration of the subnational and local levels in crafting and implementing integration policies, especially for non-EU young adult migrants. Such policies are envisioned to foster mutual coexistence between migrants and local populations, with a particular emphasis on empowering the voices of young adult migrants facing vulnerabilities. It is essential that resources allocated at international and national levels are effectively channelled to the grassroots, where integration is actively experienced. The local context, as stakeholders believe, should lead the policy-making process in integration, working in dynamic coordination with broader national and international strategies. This approach calls for a greater acknowledgment of the third sector's contributions and the value of public-private collaborations in planning and programming.

The domains identified as critical for fostering this reciprocal coexistence include education, employment, equality, diversity and inclusion, migration and asylum policies, and housing. Highlighting best practices, stakeholders emphasized the creation of centralized hubs or 'one-stop shops' that serve both migrants and service providers, thereby streamlining access to services and improving inter-service coordination. This strategy aims to 'connect the dots' between various services, enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of support provided to migrants, while also opening up the potential for more positive encounters with difference (Darling & Wilson, 2016).

Moreover, the dialogue with stakeholders unveiled a spectrum of factors that either hinder or facilitate the integration process, underscoring the complex interplay of elements that influence the lived experiences of migrants transitioning to adulthood and their interaction with local communities. The insights gained point towards a holistic approach to integration. One that addresses structural and relational barriers, acknowledges the wide array of possibilities and experiences in moves toward adulthood, while also leveraging opportunities for positive and meaningful engagement between migrants and their new communities.

## Conclusion

This article has explored the complexities and nuances of integrating young adult migrants from non-EU countries within European contexts, challenging conventional approaches and advocating for a shift towards more inclusive, locally-informed, and reciprocal "integration" processes. It has argued for a move beyond predominant "state simplifications" (Scott, 1998), present-centred orientations, and normative frameworks that have: emphasized an imagined (but fictitious) unified nationhood (or European-ness) that migrants need to orientate themselves towards; proffered a western (or Global North) centred understanding of youth transitions and expectations of adult becoming; and neglected local divergences and nuances in understandings and experiences of integration, migrant reception and youth transitions.

Through the lens of a European stakeholder Delphi study, which sought to engage migrant youth and their allies as stakeholders, we have unearthed widespread sentiments on the limitations of assimilationist integration principles. Stakeholder perspectives



highlight the need for a paradigm shift that acknowledges the diverse and dynamic nature of migrant integration, especially among young adults from non-European countries navigating significant life transitions. Our findings underscore the importance of moving beyond traditional, one-size-fits-all integration policies and normative youth transitions. The stakeholder perspectives presented might also suggest that this shift is in fact already underway at the local level in many European nations (see also Togral Koca, 2022). Through our Delphi study's findings, we articulate an emergent process-oriented approach that values the lived experiences of young migrants and the local communities that receive them. This approach recognizes integration as a multipartite process of mutual adjustments, calling for policies that are flexible, responsive, and grounded in the realities of diverse local contexts. Crucially, the vast majority of stakeholders also recognise youth groups themselves as key and valued stakeholders central to this potentially generative process.

Importantly, our findings reveal how temporality and legal precarity shape the lived experiences of young adult migrants. Stakeholders described how integration processes are often disrupted by legal uncertainty, such as temporary residence permits or asylum procedures, which prevent young people from accessing housing, education, and employment. These disruptions, sometimes articulated as “slow violence” (Mayblin et al., 2020), interrupt not only their pathways into adulthood but also the opportunity to engage meaningfully in everyday integration processes. As such, integration policies need to better recognise migrant youth as both migrants and young people, navigating a complex intersection of life-course transitions—something too often overlooked in policy frameworks that treat them as exceptional or problematic populations. In this light, offering access to “normative” youth transitions (e.g., stable housing, education, employment, relationships), while adapting for specific needs such as trauma recovery and language support, may prove more fruitful than targeted “integration” measures.

The Delphi study has revealed that stakeholders across Europe are actively and critically reflecting on the contemporary principles of migrant integration, emphasizing the harmful effects of state-centric and assimilationist policies on young migrants. These reflections show the need for an integration framework that prioritizes reciprocal living together, fostering interconnectedness and interdependence rather than mere assimilation into a predefined (and imagined) national identity. Furthermore, our analysis has highlighted the significant role that local contexts play in shaping the integration experiences of young migrants and the wide register of possibilities and encounters that this diversity gives rise to. The juxtaposition of local inclusivity against national-level xenophobia and exclusion underscores the need for policies led by local actors and communities to craft responses tailored to their unique circumstances and challenges. However, it is important to note that national and local dislocations in policy may also engender the wholesale rejection of ‘integration’ and national frameworks. This is especially the case amongst civil society organisations and grassroots social movements which take an explicit anti-racist stance against the state and racialized bordering practices of right-wing populist governments (see Dadusc, Grazioli and Martinez, 2021).

In conclusion, this article contributes to debates on migrant ‘integration’ by evidencing widespread stakeholder support for a nuanced, locally informed, and reciprocal approach where the needs of newly arrived as well as long term youth residents of European communities converge to a large extent. For our stakeholders, a youth-sensitive and

youth-centred approach to integration is required— one that acknowledges the complex and varied experiences of youth transitions for recent migrants. Such an approach also recognizes young adult migrants as active participants in shaping their own and their communities' futures.

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#### Author contributions

This was a collaborative endeavour across several countries and a large interdisciplinary team. Each co-author contributed in many different ways to the research process and writing but it would be impossible for us to attribute a percentage to each given the collective, partnership approach adopted.

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#### Data availability

No datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

#### Declarations

#### Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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