MEASURING AND IMPROVING INTEGRATION OF BENEFICIARIES OF INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION

BASELINE ASSESSMENT: LATVIA

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# Table of Contents

**Introduction** ................................................................................................................. 2

**Asylum in Latvia: Statistics and Politics** ................................................................. 4

**Policy Mainstreaming** ............................................................................................ 7

**Impact of Reception on Integration** ........................................................................ 9

**Impact of Residency on Integration** ....................................................................... 12

**Access to Family Union and Reunification** ............................................................ 15

**Citizenship: Long-Term Perspectives of Integration** ............................................. 19

**Access to Housing** .................................................................................................. 24

**Access to Employment** ........................................................................................... 29

**Access to Vocational Education** ............................................................................ 35

**Access to Health Care** ............................................................................................. 38

**Social Security of BIPs** .......................................................................................... 42

**Access to Education** ............................................................................................... 46

**Language and Social Learning** ............................................................................... 50

**Building bridges: encouraging the engagement of the host society and the civic participation of BIPs** ......................................................................................................................... 56
INTRODUCTION

This report on the implementation of various areas of integration policy towards beneficiaries of international protection in Latvia is the result of an evaluation of migration and integration policies in the EU Member States implemented as part of the project “The National Integration Evaluation Mechanism (NIEM)”.

NIEM is a six-year long transnational project which aims to prepare key actors in the integration field in 16 EU Member States to better face the current challenges and improve the integration outcomes of beneficiaries of international protection. Representatives of academic centres, non-governmental organizations and think-tanks were invited to participate in the project.

The main aim of the project is to strengthen the competence of institutions involved in the integration of persons with international protection. Within the research part of the project, a tool was developed to monitor and comprehensively evaluate the integration of beneficiaries of international protection and to identify good practices and obstacles in integration, as well as to assess the impact of legislative and policy changes. NIEM will establish a mechanism for a biennial, comprehensive assessment of the integration of beneficiaries of international protection.

The project is based on the assumption that the creation of any migration and integration policy should be based on reliable official data – statistical, legal, administrative, financial and public policy. The aim of this project is, thus, to promote evidence based policy-making, i.e. policy-making based on knowledge and empirical evidence. NIEM will provide evidence on the gaps in integration standards, identify promising practices and shortcomings in different countries, as well as evaluate the effects of legislative and policy changes which may provide a basis for further development of appropriate integration policy.

This report is the result of the first of three planned evaluation rounds – the baseline evaluation, which consists of 186 indicators aimed at assessing the existing situation. The subsequent evaluations will be done every two years. After each round, national reports will be issued, as well as a common European report comparing the examined dimensions of integration policies of all the countries participating in the NIEM project.
The present report is addressed to representatives of public administration, academic and research centres, think-tanks, non-governmental organizations, and to all those dealing with migration and integration issues. We hope that the report will be met with interest and will provide a good basis for creating policies and deepening knowledge about the integration of the beneficiaries of international protection.
ASYLUM IN LATVIA: STATISTICS AND POLITICS

Since the restoration of Latvia's independence in the beginning of 1990s, asylum flows to Latvia have been relatively low, and while the first Asylum Law was passed in June 1997, the volume of asylum requests didn’t exceed 60 per year until 2010. In the first half of the 2010s, the origin of asylum seekers coincided with conflicts in the region. For example, in 2013 most asylum requests were made by citizens of Georgia and in 2014 - of Georgia and Ukraine. However, before Latvia joined the EU Relocation Programme, the number of statuses of international protection granted each year was rather low - approximately 30 people received international protection in Latvia per year (see Graph No. 1). And, while several services existed to ensure their reception and to promote their integration in Latvia, there were virtually no targeted policies and support programs available up until late 2015. As a high standing official of the Ministry of Interior said during our research process, Latvia did not have an asylum policy.

This changed with the decision of the government of Latvia in late 2015, a year marked by intensive political discussions on how Latvia should react to the increased number of asylum seekers in the EU. There were severe cleavages in the coalition government

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where some were categorically against any quotas being defined at the EU level, while others saw this as a solidarity measure. In June 2015, an inter-institutional working group involving representatives of state institutions, and, if deemed necessary, social partners, municipalities, and NGOs, was created with the task to “create a system, suitable for the Latvian context, for the reception and integration of beneficiaries of international protection.”³ This working group also advised the Prime Minister on Latvia’s reception and integration capacity. Eventually, in September 2015, the government of Latvia committed to take in 531 asylum seekers in the framework of the EU Relocation Programme. In December 2015, the Action Plan for Movement and Admission in Latvia of Persons who Need International Protection was issued by the Cabinet of Ministers with the aim to create “a system corresponding to the circumstances of Latvia for admitting asylum seekers, as well as for socio-economic inclusion of refugees and persons who have obtained the subsidiary protection status”⁴, accompanied also by changes in the Asylum Law.⁵

As expected, the number of statuses of international protection granted since joining the EU Relocation Programme is highest in the recent history of Latvia. If from 1998 to 2016 118 persons were recognized as refugees and 255 as beneficiaries of subsidiary protection, in 2016 alone these numbers were 47 and 107 respectively, and in 2017 – 39 and 259.⁶ The main countries of origin of beneficiaries of international protection (from now on - BIPs) in the recent years have been Syria, Iraq, and Eritrea. In 2016, a trend of secondary movement developed when the majority of BIPs left Latvia after receiving status of international protection. Due to secondary movement, as of mid-2018 only about 120 asylum seekers and BIPs resided in Latvia.

The baseline assessment carried out in the framework of the NIEM project essentially analyses a reception and integration system created in response to the new realities of Latvia’s asylum landscape. This assessment focuses on the impact of the existing legal and policy framework on the integration of BIPs into Latvian society. The approach in this report is to describe the current regulation, highlight the successes and the problematic areas, provide data on outcomes where applicable (even though the data must be treated with caution due to the low number of BIPs in Latvia in 2016 and before), identify main challenges and offer possible solutions to the policy makers.

³ Prime Minister’s Order No 306 ‘On working group’, 22 July 2015, available here.
⁵ Asylum Law. Saeima, 19 January 2016, available here (older versions can also be accessed through this site).
It must be noted that a comprehensive analysis of the Latvian asylum and refugee integration policy was carried out by UNHCR from October 2014 to January 2015, and a report “Integration of Refugees in Latvia: Participation and Empowerment” was published in June 2015. Annual reports on migration and asylum, concerning main legal changes, are published by the Latvian Contact Point of the European Migration Network. Integration policy for third country nationals is assessed on a regular basis in line with the Guidelines on National Identity, Civil Society and Integration Policy 2012-2018. Therefore this report will focus exclusively on the indicators chosen to measure the possible impact of legal and policy framework on integration of BIPs, in such a way also highlighting that this impact reaches beyond each dimension of the integration process. With such an approach, the NIEM project aims to improve the existing BIP reception and integration systems across Europe by promoting a comprehensive, mainstreamed approach.

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7 Available here.
8 The reports are available here.
POLICY MAINSTREAMING

As mentioned above, in 2015 the government adopted a national strategy on the integration of beneficiaries of international protection. The Action Plan for Movement and Admission in Latvia of Persons who Need International Protection divides responsibilities among state institutions regarding different aspects of reception and inclusion of BIPs. The Action Plan thus became the first comprehensive, targeted policy planning document for BIPs. It consists of three sections - (1) selection and movement of persons, (2) admission and accommodation of asylum seekers, and (3) socio-economic inclusion. In essence, it surveyed the already available support, highlighted the need for adaptation of some services previously geared towards third country nationals (TCNs), as well as called for introducing new types of assistance mainly in the third section, for example, specific labour market integration measures or the service of social workers and social mentors. The activities in the Action Plan are mainly funded from the EC Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund or the European Social Fund, with co-funding from the national budget or the budget program “Means for Unforeseen Expenses”. It is linked with other policy planning documents, for example, the Guidelines on National Identity, Civil Society and Integration Policy 2012-2018.

The national strategy - The Action Plan - includes specific responsibilities and commitments for all relevant ministries, in addition to the ministry with prime responsibility for integration - the Ministry of Culture, as well as all relevant local and regional authorities in line with their competencies. While the process of developing the strategy and assessing its implementation also included relevant social partners – trade unions and the employers’ association, the Action Plan does not include any specific responsibilities for them.

The institutions responsible for integration of BIPs have a regular mechanism to review the implementation of the integration strategy in coordination with all relevant partners and to monitor integration outcomes for BIPs. The development and monitoring of the Action Plan takes place in working groups meeting on a regular basis no less than once in a quarter. The initial stages of devising the strategy were done under the auspices of the Ministry of Interior, who is also responsible for the first two sections of the Action Plan – selection, movement and admission of BIPs, while the Ministry of Welfare took the initiative to steer the working group on socio-
economic inclusion of BIPs. The tasks defined in the Action Plan serve as the framework for the evaluation and monitoring the progress in each of the responsible institutions. The first comprehensive assessment of the implementation of the Action Plan was carried out in the second half of 2017.\(^\text{10}\)

Local and regional authorities and NGOs are involved in the monitoring process, as well as in developing new services and activities, both in ad hoc working groups and in the framework of the quarterly Working Group. Recommendations and assessments of all stakeholders are taken into account, and the ministries as state institutions have the obligation to respond to each inquiry or letter according to the standards set forward in the national legislation. There is no evidence that this obligation is not fulfilled.

The key challenge linked with the design and implementation of a strategy on integration of BIPs is the close link between participating in the EU Relocation Programme and the Action Plan. It is unclear whether and how this strategy will continue to be implemented. With the conclusion of Latvia’s participation in the EU Relocation Programme, the context and political relevance of the Action Plan will have changed. Moreover, as there are several other policy planning documents dealing with various activities included in the section on socio-economic inclusion, and as the National Development Plan will be updated for the next period from 2021-2030, an important decision will have to be taken on the political level on the approach to integration of BIPs. We recommend maintaining a comprehensive approach and to preserve the targeted strategy approach also in the new planning period.

**Recommendations**

1. Recognize the right of BIPs to integration assistance in relevant policy planning documents.
3. Establish durable partnerships with municipalities, social partners and NGOs in order to ensure policy mainstreaming and implementation in various levels of governance.

\(^{10}\) Please find the Informational Report on the Implementation of the Action Plan for Movement and Admission in Latvia of Persons who Need International Protection from 14 November 2017 [here](#).
IMPACT OF RECEPTION ON INTEGRATION

This section looks at the possible impact of asylum procedure on integration of BIP protection, such as the length of the asylum procedure and the assessment of special reception needs.

According to the Asylum Law, an initial decision by the Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs (OCMA) has to be reached within 3 months, which can be extended up to 15 months if there are objective reasons to do so. The initial decision can be appealed in administrative court within the next 10 days, which has to reach a final decision no later than 3 months after an appeal is submitted. Our assessment based on structured interviews is that the appeal process was rarely used. In cases where certain criteria are met, the OCMA can choose to make the initial decision in 10 days. The overall estimate for the average length is 90 days. During 2016, all 154 asylum requests were processed in less than 6 months. As access to integration support activities and employment is conditioned upon the awarding of the status of a refugee or of subsidiary protection, the expedient decision-taking in the asylum process is evaluated highly.

Refugee status is awarded for those facing individual threats based on their race, ethnicity, religion, membership in a social group or political affiliations. A status of subsidiary protection is awarded to those fleeing country-wide insecurity, i.e. armed conflict. It must be noted that, as seen in the data above, that majority of BIPs receive status of subsidiary protection, notably those persons who asked for asylum in the framework of EU Relocation Programme. The implications of the diverse statuses awarded on the integration process are significant and are to be assessed in the coming sections.

On 1 January 2017 there were 99 recognised refugees and 216 beneficiaries of subsidiary protection in Latvia\(^{11}\), mostly men above the age of 18 (see Graph No. 2). Persons identified as belonging to groups with special reception needs include single parents, pregnant women, persons with serious illness or disabilities and unaccompanied minors (see Graph No. 3).

\(^{11}\) Data for individuals aged 18-64 includes all individuals aged 18+. The Population Register does not collect data on length of recognition or data on region of residence, which means those who engaged in secondary movement to Germany or Sweden might not be reflected in these statistics.
It is the identification of special reception needs, or lack thereof, that creates the most significant obstacles to integration of BIPs in the host society. There is an individual assessment, inter alia, of special reception needs, established by the Asylum Law, but it does not lead to more favourable procedural rules for those so identified than for other asylum seekers. This does not pose significant challenges, as the asylum procedure in Latvia is rather speedy. The main challenge lies in the fact that non-existent or late identification of special reception needs impacts the support provided to the BIPs during and after the asylum procedure and therefore hampers their integration.
The methodology for assessing special reception needs upon arrival has been developed by international organizations, for example European Asylum Support Office (EASO), and there have been trainings at the responsible institutions on the use of these tools during the asylum process. However, according to our research, not all immigration experts or border guard representatives are fully equipped to use this methodology, and therefore in most cases no effort is made to assess special reception needs. The problem is exacerbated by the lack of interpreters who have been specifically trained to convey messages in a sensitive way in order to allow specific reception needs to be identified, as well as by the lack of cooperation between different service providers to allow for catering to these specific reception needs during the asylum procedure. For example, service providers such as social workers and social mentors, psychologists, doctors, or representatives of the administration at the reception centre sometimes received the information about specific reception needs at a later stage of the asylum process, hence delaying a tailored approach to service provision. That negatively impacts both the asylum procedure, as well as the integration process after receiving status.

While the numbers of asylum seekers with special reception needs are not staggering, these groups would benefit from a more expedient and adapted asylum procedure. We recommend the use of the existing resources, for example, the EASO Tool for Identification of Persons with Special Needs\textsuperscript{12} to design and implement a more coherent and thorough identification procedure. We also suggest developing a coordination strategy between the State Border Guard and other stakeholders assisting in the reception and accommodation of BIPs during the asylum procedure. This would ensure a better circulation of information that is relevant for better service provision and facilitating the initial stages of the integration process.

**Recommendations**

1. Design and implement a coherent and thorough procedure for identifying special reception needs, using existing resources provided by, i.e., European Asylum Support Office.
2. Develop a coordination strategy between the State Border Guard and other stakeholders, i.e. social workers and social mentors, reception centre staff, medical personnel, involved in the reception and accommodation of BIPs to ensure timely exchange of information.
3. Ensure that interpreters possess necessary skills for communicating sensitive information to allow identifying special reception needs either through training local interpreters or through expanding the pool of interpreters using online communication services.

\textsuperscript{12}Tool is available here.
IMPACT OF RESIDENCY ON INTEGRATION

This section looks at the impact of the type of residence permit awarded on the integration of BIPs. Access to permanent residence is critical for the further integration process, as it is closely linked with the type and range of support and services available. The laws regulating the types of residence permit awarded are the Asylum Law\textsuperscript{13}, the Immigration Law\textsuperscript{14}, the Law on the Status of a Long-term Resident of the European Community in the Republic of Latvia\textsuperscript{15}, and the Regulations Regarding Residence Permits\textsuperscript{16}.

A recognised refugee shall be issued a permanent residence permit, a person who has acquired subsidiary protection status (alternative status in Latvia’s legal acts) shall be issued a temporary residence permit for one year with the possibility of renewal. A person can apply for permanent residence permit after five years uninterrupted residency in the country upon proving knowledge of the Latvian language at A2 level. Thus, if the temporary residence permit is issued for a person with subsidiary protection status for five consecutive years, they will then have the right to apply for a permanent residence permit. The time spent waiting for the decision in the asylum request is not counted towards the residence requirement. Persons with temporary protection status receive a temporary residence permit for one year with the possibility to be extended for another six months, but not more than for one year in total. Thus, persons with temporary protection status will not have access to permanent residence. According to the Law on the Status of a Long-term Resident of the European Community in the Republic of Latvia, this status is not available to those who have received refugee or alternative status or temporary protection in the Republic of Latvia or have requested asylum in the Republic of Latvia.

In practice all BIPs are recognized as refugees or beneficiaries of subsidiary protection, and other types of status are not granted (see statistics about statuses granted in 2016 in Graph No.1). Moreover, the number of persons receiving refugee status is significantly lower compared to those receiving the status of subsidiary protection. People who are resettled or relocated within the EU Relocation Programme (only since

\textsuperscript{13} Asylum Law is available here.
\textsuperscript{14} Immigration Law is available here.
\textsuperscript{15} Law on the Status of a Long-term Resident of the European Community in the Republic of Latvia is available here.
\textsuperscript{16} Regulations Regarding Residence Permits is available here.
fall 2015) go through the regular asylum procedure upon arrival, their status is not
determined before arriving in Latvia, hence differing from the classic understanding of
resettlement as done in Canada or the U.S.\textsuperscript{17}, for example. That also means that they
can be granted either the refugee status or status of subsidiary protection. For
example, many of those resettled or relocated to Latvia according to the EU Relocation
Programme were Syrians, and Syrians in general are granted subsidiary protection
status in Latvia.

While recognized refugees become permanent residents along with the awarding of
their status of international protection, for beneficiaries of subsidiary protection the
conditions for acquiring permanent residence permit are the same as for other third
country nationals. The following requirements are to be fulfilled: 1) he or she has
sufficient subsistence provision in order to support himself or herself and the
dependent family members thereof; 2) he or she has learned the official language (A2
level); 3) he or she has continuously and legally resided in the territory of the Republic
of Latvia (...) with a temporary residence permit. There were no applications by
beneficiaries of subsidiary protection for permanent residence in 2016, however, as
the number of awarded statuses of international protection was so low until 2016, the
data on applications for permanent residence permits are not necessarily
representative of the situation in Latvia.

**Vulnerable groups** of BIPs do not benefit from facilitated conditions for acquiring
permanent residency, compared to ordinary beneficiaries of international protection.
According to the Asylum Law and Immigration Law, the special conditions of
vulnerable persons should be taken into account during the asylum procedure but will
not have an effect on the type of the status awarded.

The regular fee for obtaining a residence permit, be it permanent for recognized
refugees or temporary for beneficiaries of subsidiary protection, is 14.23 EUR. The
procedure allows for receiving residence permit in 2 instead of the usual 10 days at
twice the cost. At the same time, since the second half of 2016, if the first application
for international protection is successful, beneficiaries are not required to pay the
permit fee, as established in Regulations regarding state fees for issuing identification
documents.\textsuperscript{18} BIPs also have access to state funded legal aid though the Legal Aid

\textsuperscript{17} Read more about resettlement programmes \textsuperscript{here.}
\textsuperscript{18} Available \textsuperscript{here.}
Administration of Latvia, especially for assistance during the asylum procedure. In 2016 nearly 10’000 EUR was devoted for the provision of such aid for BIPs.

Several challenges for the integration of BIPs were identified in the current regulation regarding the types of residence permit awarded. First, the divergent accessibility to permanent residency. Most people seeking asylum in Latvia are awarded subsidiary protection status (in 2016 - 47 people were awarded refugee status, and 107 - status of subsidiary protection). That impacts BIPs' access to permanent residence. While persons who receive refugee status, receive permanent residence permit immediately, persons under subsidiary protection are eligible for only a temporary residence permit during the first five years of their stay in Latvia, and this temporary residence permit must be renewed annually. That not only impacts the road to citizenship, but also influences the basket of services available for the different groups of beneficiaries. For example, those holding temporary residence permit are not eligible for state support in cases of disability or care-taking for minors or persons with disability.

Second, several experts identified a diminished motivation resulting from very short residence permit. Under the current regulations, beneficiaries of subsidiary protection receive only a year-long temporary residence permit, which is renewed every year after their re-application for asylum status is granted. Because of this, beneficiaries of subsidiary protection often view Latvia as a temporary rather than final destination, and they lack the motivation required to plan for long-term residence here. It also increases feeling of instability and insecurity. Overcoming both of these challenges would require increasing the period for which temporary residence permit is awarded.

Recommendations

1. When awarding status of subsidiary protection, increase the period of time for which the residence permit is awarded to promote a secure and durable residency status for all BIPs.
2. Diminish the differences in services and support available by defining all BIPs as eligible for support associated with permanent residence permit.
ACCESS TO FAMILY UNION AND REUNIFICATION

Worries about family members who might still be in conflict or transit zones may impair the focus on participation in various inclusion-oriented activities. Therefore, family union and family reunification - the process for bringing together family members - are critical for better outcomes in the integration process. Indeed, family reunification helps ensure sociocultural stability that in turn promotes economic and societal cohesion. The number of family reunification cases for BIPs in Latvia is very low, in 2016 only 5 people immigrated under this regulation. However, by addressing the current legal framework for family union and reunification, we can assess the opportunity structures provided for BIPs. The main legal acts regulating this are the Asylum Law and the Regulations Regarding Residence Permits. The Asylum Law defines family members as “the spouse of an asylum seeker, refugee or a person who has been granted [subsidiary protection] status or temporary protection, and also the minor child of an asylum seeker, refugee or a person who has been granted [subsidiary protection] status or temporary protection and the spouse of such person, who is not married and is dependent on both or one of the spouses or is adopted, and also the father, mother or other adult who in accordance with the laws and regulations of the Republic of Latvia is responsible for the beneficiary of international protection, if the above-mentioned beneficiary of international protection is a minor and not married, provided that such family has already existed in the country of origin”.

There are two main routes for ensuring that the family is brought together in Latvia. First, if BIPs immigrate with family members who do not individually qualify for protection (for example, in cases of seeking political asylum), their family members can receive a comparable legal status and benefits under the principle of family unity. Second, if the family is separated from the BIP, family members are eligible to join the sponsor under family reunification. An unaccompanied minor who has been granted international protection and who is not married has the right to receive the mother and father who have arrived from a foreign country. As Latvia’s Asylum Law defines only spouses or minor children as family members, other dependents, for example, elderly parents or grandparents or other close relatives of adult BIPs, do not qualify for international protection in Latvia under the principles of family union or reunification.

Moreover, access to family reunification differs between recognized refugees and persons with subsidiary protection status. Recognized refugees can apply for family
reunification immediately after having been granted status of international protection, while beneficiaries of subsidiary protection must reside in Latvia for two years before applying, which means they have to have renewed their BIP status twice before inviting their family to join. There are no economic resource requirements, no requirements for level of Latvian language knowledge or mandatory participation in integration measures, as well as no obligatory DNA or age test requirement. However, while recognized refugees do not have to provide health insurance for their family members, beneficiaries of subsidiary protection do to the same extent as other TCNs, as their family members are awarded temporary residence permit.

There are no general exemptions for BIPs regarding the provision of documents to prove family ties; however, the application for family reunification can be processed without providing documents that prove family relationship if a valid reason is given in the application. The standard time length for examining documents related to the family reunification procedure is set in the law at 30 days, and for an extra fee it can even be expedited. Unaccompanied minors and victims of trafficking do not have to pay the fee for the application, but there are no exemptions for other BIPs with special reception needs.

The average duration of a family reunification procedure in 2016 was 90 days. Tracing is not part of the reunification procedure, and family tracing services are not provided to BIPs. Thus, the family reunification procedure is directly dependent on the resources of BIPs and can thus provide an additional obstacle to the inclusion process.

A family member of a recognized refugee shall be issued a permanent residence permit. A temporary residence permit shall be issued to the family member of a person having acquired subsidiary protection status for the same time period as the temporary residence permit that has been issued to the sponsor. Family members must wait between 3 and 5 years to obtain a residence permit which is autonomous

19 Before 2014, beneficiaries of subsidiary protection had to fulfil the same requirements for sufficient income as other TCNs, thus the current regulation has become more accommodating for BIPs.
20 Regulations Regarding the State Fee for Examination of the Documents Necessary for Requesting a Visa, Residence Permit or the Status of a Long-term Resident of the European Union in the Republic of Latvia and the Services Related Thereto, Art.5.3 and 5.6. End of validity 01 January 2018. Available here. For recognized refugees it is possible to pay an extra EUR 78.26 (since 2018 – EUR 140) for it to be reviewed in 10 working days or an extra EUR 106.71 (since 2018 – EUR 210) for their application to be reviewed in five instead of 30 working days. For beneficiaries of subsidiary protection, it is possible to pay an extra EUR 64.03 (since 2018 – EUR 60) for application to be reviewed in five instead of 30 working days, and an extra EUR 42.69 (since 2018 – EUR 40) for it to be reviewed in 10 working days. For both groups it is possible to have the application for residence permit be reviewed in 2 working days instead of 10 working days at an extra cost of EUR 14.23. While there is no data on actual average costs incurred, the lowest average fee was estimated to be at EUR 150.82 based on the lowest possible fees in 2016.
of their sponsor’s. That means that the family members of beneficiaries of subsidiary protection are subject to similar challenges regarding annual renewal of their residence permit and access to permanent residence.

As family members are either given a permanent residence permit or a temporary one, their rights are the same as for other TCNs holding the respective residence permits to access integration programmes, language classes, education and vocational training, employment and self-employment, social security and assistance, health care and other services. However, services available to recognized refugees and their family members as permanent residents and to beneficiaries of subsidiary protection and their family members as temporary residents differ (see more at Social security).

The current regulation is consistent with the respective EU Directives, as the minimum conditions for family union and reunification are fulfilled, but at the same time several challenges are posed by the existing family union and family reunification principles to the integration process of BIPs. First, the different criteria depending on asylum status put beneficiaries of subsidiary protection in a disadvantageous position. According to the existing legislation, beneficiaries of subsidiary protection have a required residence period of 2 years before they can submit an application for family reunification, while refugees can apply for family reunification as soon as their status has been granted. Since a significant majority of beneficiaries in Latvia receive subsidiary protection status, this, even if consistent with international norms, directly impacts their ability to engage in the reunification procedure. Overcoming this challenge would require changing regulations to provide equal access to the reunification procedure for all BIPs regardless of the status they have received.

Second, the lack of a proactive family tracing procedure puts constraints on BIPs and their already limited resources. The existing family reunification provisions require that the host country institutions proactively search for family members of BIPs once an application for family reunification has been made. In practice, while there are some proactive efforts from the responsible institutions, it is unclear whether these institutions have the necessary capacity and the know-how to provide quality assistance, which means that only efforts from BIPs themselves are likely to lead to reunification. Of course, as the number of family reunification cases is quite low, the know-how and experience in dealing with such situations may remain limited.
However, the capacity of the responsible institutions can be raised through specific training and by referring to existing practical tools.21

Finally, some experts pointed out the lack of consistency in granting asylum applications as a challenge for family reunion. The Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs, which is responsible for reviewing initial asylum applications, has received criticism for inconsistent approach when deciding on asylum applications, mainly due to lack of effort to review case law from other countries. This has led to cases where asylum seekers from similar backgrounds, particularly Iraq, and even from the same family have received different outcomes on their application.

For an asylum system that would benefit the integration of all BIPs irrespective of their status, it is necessary to move beyond the minimum standards and seek the opportunity to provide equal conditions for family reunification to all BIPs instead of prioritizing recognized refugees.

1. **Provide equal access** to the reunification procedure for all BIPs regardless of the status they have received, thus removing the requirement of a 2-year residence to beneficiaries of subsidiary protection.
2. **Introduce standardized and coordinated procedures** for family reunification in order to ensure speedy family tracing processes, orderly arrival and coordinated assistance.
3. **Increase the capacity and know-how** of officials to provide quality assistance in family tracing and family reunification processes by using existing resources developed by, i.e. European Asylum Support Office.

21 See, for example, EASO Practical Guide on Family Tracing, available here.
CITIZENSHIP: LONG-TERM PERSPECTIVES OF INTEGRATION

This section looks at the pathway to citizenship available to BIPs. While the grounds for granting asylum to BIPs may change over time, there will be cases when conflicts become protracted over longer periods of time or when the country of citizenship of a BIP will not become more capable of providing the protection needed. In those cases, access to citizenship is crucial for a meaningful integration in the host country. In the case of Latvia, the assessment of the existing legal and policy indicators highlights a rather short-sighted approach to asylum. Indeed, this is the most poorly scored section, and, in addition, there is a stark difference between recognized refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection.

The primary legal act regulating the access to citizenship is Citizenship Law. The permanent place of residence, on the day of submitting an application for naturalisation, has to have been in Latvia for no less than the last five years of which an interruption of one year in total is permitted but which cannot be during the last year before the day of submitting the application for naturalisation (for a citizen of another country or stateless person the five-year period shall be counted from the day of the receipt of the permanent residence permit or permanent residence certificate). Thus, recognized refugees will be eligible for naturalization after 5 years of being granted asylum in Latvia, as they receive a permanent residence permit along with their status of international protection. Beneficiaries of subsidiary protection, on the other hand, face the same residence requirement to be eligible for naturalisation as ordinary TCNs - after five years of temporary residence they can apply for a permanent residence permit, and then after another five years - for citizenship, making their road to becoming a citizen twice as long as for recognized refugees. Citizenship, thus, is dependent on having a permanent residence permit for at least five years, and the time period of temporary residence in case of subsidiary protection is not taken into account for citizenship.

There are no facilitated conditions for naturalisation for BIPs in comparison to ordinary TCNs - they have to fulfil the same requirements in all areas. Section 12 of the

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22 Citizenship Law is available here.
Citizenship Law lists these requirements. Besides permanent residence, only the following person can be admitted to Latvian citizenship through naturalisation: who is fluent in the Latvian language; who knows the basic principles of the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia; who knows the text of the National Anthem and the basics of the history and culture of Latvia; who has a legal source of income; who has given a pledge of loyalty to the Republic of Latvia. Chapter Three of Citizenship Law “Testing the Fluency in the Latvian Language and Knowledge of the Basic Principles of the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia, the Text of the National Anthem, the Basics of the History and Culture of Latvia”, as well as respective Cabinet Regulations No.973\(^2\) further specify language and integration requirements.

Section 21 of the Citizenship Law defines exemptions from testing fluency in Latvian, basic principles of the Constitution and the basics of history and culture of Latvia. The requirements are reduced for unaccompanied minors, elderly and the disabled, but not to those BIPs who were victims of rape, torture or other forms of trauma.

Beneficiaries of subsidiary protection also have to submit a notification regarding the renunciation of his or her former citizenship and have to have received an expatriation authorisation from the country of his or her former citizenship, if such authorisation is provided for by the laws of that country, or have to have received a document certifying the loss of citizenship. This latter requirement does not apply to recognized refugees. As highlighted by experts, this requirement has posed difficulties for beneficiaries of subsidiary protection, as their countries of origin do not respond to such requests, for example, in the case of Afghanistan or Somalia.

Having a criminal record in Latvia or another country is one of the restrictions on naturalisation, specified in Section 11 of Citizenship Law: “he or she has been convicted in Latvia or any other country for committing such criminal offence that is qualified as criminal offence also in Latvia during examination of an application for naturalisation. This condition shall not apply to a person who has been convicted for committing a criminal offence in a foreign country, if it has been recognised in accordance with the procedures specified by the Cabinet that in respect of such person a judgement of conviction has been rendered without complying with the principle of fair trial or of proportionality of the punishment.” In order to verify the conformity of the person

\(^2\) Cabinet Regulation No. 973 "Regulations Regarding Testing the Fluency in the Latvian Language and Knowledge of the Basic Principles of the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia, the Text of the National Anthem, the Basics of the History and Culture of Latvia", 24 September 2013, available here.
with the requirements referred to in Section 11 “Restrictions on Naturalisation” and Section 17 “Procedures for the Acceptance, Examination, Contestation and Appeal of an Application for Naturalisation”, Paragraph two of the Citizenship Law, the Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs shall request information in writing from respective state institutions. While this requirement is the same for all TCNs, the highlighted area is particularly crucial for BIPs, especially if their fleeing is for political reasons.

Children who are born in the country (second generation BIPs) have facilitated conditions for naturalization. If one of the parents acquires or has acquired Latvian citizenship through naturalisation, upon the request of the person to be naturalised the children of such person who are up to 15 years of age and whose permanent place of residence is in Latvia shall also acquire Latvian citizenship. The conditions for naturalisation, for example, residence in Latvia for 5 years, knowledge of Latvian, knowledge of the Constitution, knowledge of the national anthem, history and culture of Latvia, legal source of income, giving a pledge of loyalty to Latvia or acknowledging the renunciation of previous citizenship, among others, shall not apply to children who have not reached 15 years of age. Moreover, children of the stateless or non-citizens are automatically entitled to citizenship, if the child is born in Latvia.

Citizenship Law sets a maximum time for the procedure of naturalisation at one year, but it does not prioritize BIPs. Thus, BIPs follow the same route to citizenship as others wishing to naturalise. The fee for naturalisation is EUR 28.46, but the fee is reduced to EUR 4.27 per application if a BIP is a person in need, an unemployed person registered with the State Employment Agency, member of a family with three or more underage children, of retirement age, a person with group II or III disability, full time students at a secondary or higher education institution. The fee is waived for persons with group I disability, orphans and children left without parental care, and persons who have been admitted to state or municipal care institutions.\textsuperscript{24}

\textsuperscript{24} Cabinet Regulations No.849 “Regulations on State Fee for the Application for Naturalization”, 1 October 2013, \url{available here}. 

\[\text{Providus Centre for Public Policy}\]
In 2016, only three BIPs - recognised refugees went through the naturalisation procedure - one adult with a child aged under 15, in which case the procedure took 6 months, and one 15-year old child with a disability not subjected to the requirements set forward in the legislation for whom the process took 4 months. As experts pointed out during the assessment process, the naturalisation rates among BIPs and TCNs in general are quite low. This is for several reasons, including practical preference for native (mostly, Russian) citizenships and Latvian residence permit (if dual citizenship is not allowed), as well as lack of motivation to acquire the citizenship and the difficulty of the language test that is required. This also extends to BIPs who rarely apply for citizenship and can influence their motivation to become involved in integration activities in general. So far, the political narrative has not been focused on promotion of long-term integration of BIPs, thus no targeted measures are in place to promote their naturalization, and the initial support for language learning and societal integration is not aimed at eventual naturalisation, but rather the meeting of basic needs.

Access to citizenship is yet another area where there is clearly a differential treatment for recognised refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection, which then exacerbates the low levels of naturalisation. As refugees receive a permanent residence permit upon awarding their status, persons under subsidiary protection are initially only eligible for a temporary residence permit that is to be renewed every year, and they can apply for permanent residence permit after 5 years of temporary residence in the country. That means that the time period for naturalisation for persons under subsidiary protection is twice as long, and in the meantime the support granted to them in the shape of benefits and social assistance in the initial five years is significantly lower (see more below on social security).

Above all, the main challenge is the lack of a long-term perspective. The primary aim of the reception and integration process is not to provide BIPs with tools for their long-term integration in the society of Latvia, it is rather to process the asylum requests and give basic initial support. In addition, the status of subsidiary protection in the case of Latvia provides several other reasons for insecurity and instability, such as shorter time period for monthly allowance, limited state social assistance, longer waiting times for family reunification, which all as one influence the motivation and willingness to pursue integration activities in Latvia, especially in the long term. Overcoming these challenges would at least require extending the time period for
which the temporary residence permit is granted, as well as equalizing the available support for all BIPs alike.

Moreover, targeted naturalisation support activities for BIPs should be introduced already during the initial stages of social orientation.

**Recommendations**

1. Develop a comprehensive policy facilitating naturalization for BIPs and their immediate family members, taking into account some requirements that might be difficult or impossible for BIPs to meet.
2. Lift the requirement to renounce previous citizenship also for beneficiaries of subsidiary protection or introduce other solutions of renunciation in cases when it is nearly impossible to receive a confirmation from the country of former citizenship.
Access to Housing

This section looks not only at the availability of housing, but also the existing support mechanisms that facilitate acquiring decent accommodation. Housing is one of the core elements of socioeconomic inclusion and is closely linked with the feeling of stability and security.

BIPs have the same right for free movement and residence as nationals, and thus can choose freely their place of residence even during the asylum procedure. Indeed, while most asylum seekers stay at the temporary reception centre “Mucenieki” during the asylum procedure, some also stay on their own, with relatives or friends. All that matters at this stage is that the OCMA is informed about their whereabouts or an address for information purposes.

BIPs have the legal right to equal treatment in housing and housing benefits, however, there are conditions they cannot always fulfil as newcomers. BIPs have the right to request municipality support for housing, including support for rental costs, and according to the Law on Social Services and Social Assistance, local municipalities have the right to provide housing benefits (i.e. support for rental costs) to BIPs in the same way and amount as other residents of the municipality, however this does not set out an obligation. Indeed, according to the Law on Assistance on Solving Housing Matters, BIPs are not spelled out as one of the primary groups for municipal assistance regarding housing; however, any municipality may choose to set BIPs as such at their own volition. In addition, a person must have their place of residence registered in a particular municipality, sometimes even for a certain time period ranging from 3 to 5 or more years before they are eligible for certain types of municipality support, a condition BIPs cannot meet as newcomers and without access to housing.

The law does not require that housing policy and services take into account the specific situation and vulnerabilities of BIPs - this group is not identified as a vulnerable group in eligibility for mainstream housing benefits, nor is the availability of targeted housing support required by law for BIPs (i.e. transitional support from asylum accommodation centres, special homes, special counselling services for access to housing). Moreover, the fact that BIPs are not recognised as one of the vulnerable groups for municipality assistance is oftentimes used as an excuse by the municipalities not to provide housing support, instead of taking the initiative to
introduce them as such on the municipal level. Thus, in addition to excessive waiting periods for social housing that are faced by all those societal groups eligible for such municipality assistance (for example, in 2016 in Riga, the capital, there were 4000 people waiting in line, the procedure is subject to discretionary decisions with an uncertain outcome - the municipality makes the decision whether to grant any assistance for housing for BIPs at all. And, although BIPs have received housing benefits from local municipalities, these are not targeted or mainstream, but rather requesting reimbursement of expenses from the emergency budget of the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Regional Development. In 2016, municipalities granted BIPs a total of EUR 10170 as a part of assistance provided for education, social security, housing, as well as day centre reception services.

BIPs' property rights are similar to those as other TCNs - they cannot buy land in the border area, restricted national parks, farming land, or land with valuable resources, according to the Law on Land Privatisation in Rural Areas.25

While already during the early stages of the implementation of the Action Plan housing was identified as one of the key challenges for successful socio-economic inclusion of BIPs and the Ministry of Economic was tasked to assess the possible solutions, no targeted measures were implemented to address or raise awareness of the specific challenges of BIPs on the housing market.

No targeted housing advice, counselling and representation is available for BIPs by housing experts. Even though a social worker and a social mentor is assigned to each BIP for 3 months during the asylum application process and 12 months after receiving status of international protection, with the role, inter alia, to assist in securing housing; however, the mentors are not legal experts on housing, thus there is no targeted legal advice. There are also legal consultations available for all third country nationals at the Information Centre for Immigrants, but they do not provide representation in housing disputes, for example. There is also no targeted housing support available for BIPs neither in-cash nor in-kind, neither temporary nor in the long-term.

It must be noted that in 2017, a pilot-project was introduced to test one possible solution to the challenges regarding housing for BIPs. This project is implemented by the Society Integration Foundation, and in the framework of the project, several

25 Available here
families receive a reimbursement for their rental costs. The amount reimbursed depends on the size of the family, and the reimbursement is conditioned upon their active participation in language learning, employment and educational activities. The results of this pilot-project will be evaluated at the end of 2018, and only then can one assess whether it will grow further to become a targeted support activity in the longer run.

Moreover, the housing market is characterised by discrimination and negative attitude towards BIPs. Many BIPs have reported a significant change in willingness to rent out a property by potential landlords after being introduced to the ethnicity or migration status of the person. Since BIPs are expected to move out of the temporary reception centre as soon as their asylum application has been approved, this creates a time pressure for finding housing and increases the overall housing costs in market of limited choice as a result of discrimination. Currently this problem is being addressed mainly with the help of social mentors who assist the BIPs in negotiations with potential landlords. While in some cases this kind of approach has been successful, in practice the low monthly allowance in combination with discrimination means that most BIPs find housing only through community organisations, which sometimes allows them to rent out a property either for free or at a very low cost, but often only for a short period of time. Only BIPs who have been able to secure employment are able to afford housing at market price. All of the involved institutions and NGOs have expressed concern regarding discrimination and voiced support towards activities that aim to fight stereotypes and increase the awareness of these issues. Several activities are aimed at the promotion of mutual understanding. For example, an NGO “I want to help refugees” is leading the effort by organizing local community gatherings and hosting live story sharing events aimed at facilitating understanding between locals and BIPs, but these kind of efforts, while helpful, only reach a very small part of population, and changing negative attitudes and improving tolerance towards individuals from other cultures is likely to take a long time. Another activity that was launched only in 2018 is an awareness-raising campaign in the framework of a project ‘Diversity Promotion’.

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26 Data on average cost of a rental apartment was calculated by the Ministry of Economics, based on observed market trends. The cost of a 60 m² apartment in the capital outside of the city centre was estimated at EUR 300 per month on average. Thus, the estimated rental costs for one to two individuals was EUR 250, EUR 300 for 3 persons, EUR 350 for 4 persons, and EUR 400 for 5 or more persons.
As a result of all the aforementioned challenges, no more than 20% of BIPs in 2016 were living in the locality or region they would prefer. According to interviews with experts and practitioners, more than ⅔ of BIPs dedicated a disproportionately high share of rental costs in comparison to their income and other expenditures, and approximately ⅓ of BIPs lived in overcrowded living conditions, in substandard housing conditions and in a remote location limiting their access to schooling, health care, employment or community life.

The responsible institutions and politicians have so far failed to address the issue of accessible and affordable housing, and Latvia simply does not have a working housing policy for BIPs. The most recently passed amendment to the Asylum Law, which doubles the allowance received in the first month, but decreases the overall length of assistance, is an effort that helps larger families, but will not be enough for smaller families and BIPs who are in the country alone. Several alternative options, including temporary housing designated for beneficiaries and a loan program have been considered, but were dismissed. Overcoming this challenge will inevitably require either increasing the monthly allowance or introducing a dedicated in-cash or in-kind housing support, but such efforts in the past have been met with fierce political resistance. As the number of relocated and overall asylum seekers in Latvia is currently set to decline, changes to the policy seem unlikely to happen in the near future.
In order to improve the housing situation of BIPs and in such a way facilitate their integration in the society, the following measures may be taken. First, a formal strategy on access to housing for BIPs involving all relevant partners should be developed and adopted, perhaps, drawing on the experience of the pilot-project on housing implemented in 2017-2018. This strategy should also include clear monitoring mechanisms to assess the housing outcomes of BIPs, as well as impact assessment of the current housing legislation and practices on the integration outcomes of BIPs. Such a strategy can be designed and implemented only in close cooperation with municipalities, thus their capacity in working with BIPs must be strengthened, not least through funding earmarked for the support of BIPs.

Second, several measures should be taken to raise awareness for the specific challenges of BIPs on the housing market, ranging from publicly funded campaigns targeting prejudice and discrimination, as the one launched recently by Society Integration Foundation with the slogan ‘Openness is A Value’\(^\text{27}\) to information raising among employees of municipalities on the specific limitations of BIPs on the housing market to increase the understanding of their particular vulnerabilities and urgency of help needed.

**Recommendations**

1. **Develop and adopt** a formal strategy on access to housing for BIPs involving all relevant partners, drawing on the experience of the pilot-project on housing implemented in 2017-2018. Highlight the role of municipalities in securing affordable housing.

2. **Develop partnerships** with the private sector to promote access to housing and to design programmes linking housing and employment opportunities, such as matching the skills of the BIP with the availability of secure and affordable housing.

3. **Implement awareness raising campaigns** about the specific challenges of BIPs on the housing market to promote tolerance and anti-discrimination in access to housing.

\(^\text{27}\) More information available [here](#).

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[Providus Centre for Public Policy]
Access to Employment

This section assesses the legal framework and policies that promote labour market integration of BIPs. Both recognized refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection have the same access to the labour market as nationals and citizens of other countries with a valid work permit. While the legal framework of employment does not identify BIPs as a vulnerable group and does not presuppose targeted employment support to this group due to their specific situation, there are several initiatives that have prioritized BIPs as needing additional support for successful labour market integration, introduced both in the reporting period, as well as in 2017 and after.

**Graph No. 5: Data for Employment of BIPs**

**In 2016 and 2017**

**Data:** State Employment Agency (SEA). This data only reflects those BIPs employed with the help of SEA. In 2016, only 1 person had found employment using SEA. Many BIPs engaged in labour market integration activities provided by SEA but left Latvia before succeeding in finding a place of work.
The Ministry of Welfare, the ministry responsible for employment has not adopted a formal strategy involving all relevant partners (government ministries, trade unions and other employee organisations, chambers and other employer organisations, regional and local authorities, NGOs) to facilitate the integration of BIPs through employment, including a monitoring system to assess the outcomes of BIPs in the labour market or a mechanism to assess the impact of employment legislation, practices and services and outcomes on this target group. Indirectly, such a strategy is included in the Action Plan.

The Action Plan set forward to promote a comprehensive approach to socio-economic inclusion, and labour market integration is one of the central elements of this approach. According to the plan, already during the asylum procedure an introductory course "Work Opportunities in Latvia" with an overview of work opportunities, labour protection principles, remuneration and similar topics should be offered. Employment is also one of the topics of the social orientation course provided to asylum seekers. There was a proposal to assess the possibilities of employing asylum seekers in temporary or voluntary jobs at the temporary reception centre, but that was never brought to life.

Upon receiving the status of international protection, BIPs embark on the path of socio-economic inclusion with employment being the main means to achieve this. The plan of activities at the State Employment Agency follows these steps: 1) granting of the status of unemployed persons/persons seeking employment in accordance with the Law On Unemployed Persons and Persons Seeking Employment;\(^\text{28}\) 2) profiling of the client - their education and skills; 3) drawing up of an individual plan for seeking

\(^{28}\) Available here
employment; 4) career consultations; 5) cooperation with prospective employers; 6) cooperation with the social worker and social mentor; 7) offering active labour market policy measures appropriate for the client; 8) acquisition of the Latvian language; 9) measures for increasing competitiveness (vocational education); 10) subsidised working place; 11) training with the employer; 12) participation in paid temporary public work. The total funding required for these activities was 1.5 million EUR in 2016 and 2017, with more than half coming from the EU. Both the information for asylum seekers, as well as the steps identified in the Action Plan were included in a project implemented by the State Employment Agency (SEA) - “Integration of refugees and persons with alternative status in the labour market of Latvia”. In 2016, the overall spending by the SEA was EUR 6211, which includes both state co-funding (25% - EUR 1552) and EU project funding and covered the entire spectrum of State Employment Agency activities related to BIPs. Some support activities were implemented as a part of the general employment promotion programmes. However, labour market integration of BIPs has been picking up its pace rather slowly.

As mentioned before, BIPs have the same access to the labour market as nationals and citizens of other countries with a valid work permit. Asylum seekers are allowed to work only if there has been no decision taken on their status for 6 months. At the same time, there are certain conditions BIPs cannot meet as newcomers when just embarking in the Latvian labour market, most importantly - the language requirements. According to the Official Language Law, the language requirements are set according to functional needs of the professional role and start at the A2 level for basic roles. Even employees of private institutions, organisations and undertakings (companies), and self-employed persons, shall use the official language if their activities affect the lawful interests of the public. Therefore, even if a newcomer wants to start a business aimed at client service, for example, a restaurant or a shop, the same strict language requirements apply if their position requires communication with clients. At the same time, the requirement for knowing the official language is to some extent open to interpretation also by the employer and can be used to not hire a BIP.

Thus, access to many potential jobs, as well as support for job seekers from the SEA (such as vocational courses) is limited by these language requirements. It is virtually

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29 In practice the support for asylum seekers entering the labour market is very scarce, because they have not yet registered as job seekers/unemployed. Besides the general orientation course, they receive consultations from a SEA consultant before being awarded a status (i.e. on how to prepare their CV or what to consider before a job interview).

30 Available here.
impossible for BIPs to learn Latvian at the required level (at least A2) during the asylum process that generally takes three months. Moreover, while the SEA offers registered job seekers 720 hours of language courses, the insufficient monthly allowance (EUR 139 or EUR 98 to every other member of the family) forces BIPs to seek employment as soon as possible instead of devoting time to language learning. That may lead to discrepancies between the actual skills of BIPs and the skills required in the positions available to them without knowledge of Latvian. An ongoing pilot project by the Ministry of Welfare will attempt to combine profession-specific language learning for BIPs, which might lead to better individual results. At the same time, given the political environment in Latvia, these language requirements are unlikely to change or be relaxed specifically for BIPs in the near future. Therefore, a support system that provides housing assistance and sufficient monthly financial benefits that would allow beneficiaries to focus solely on learning the language, will allow for better job prospects in the future.

Another challenge for BIPs in accessing the labour market is the recognition of their skills. BIPs have the same rights to skill validation as other TCNs or citizens - an assessment at the State Employment Agency and the validation of skills not recognised in formal diplomas by the State Education Quality Service. The latter requires a fee and must be undergone in Latvian. BIPs also have the same rights as other TCNs or nationals to the recognition of formal degrees and that is performed by the Academic Information Centre. This service also requires a fee. The state also provides guidelines for assessments where documentary evidence from the country of origin is unavailable (i.e. level of education, skills, needs), but no financial or technical assistance to complete the procedure (i.e. to acquire or translate documents or pass exams, or reduced fees for the application). Hence, the fees, the fact that some of the assessments require quite an advanced knowledge of Latvian or the possibility of additional expenses incurred during this assessment limits the full use of BIPs’ rights to skill recognition. Indeed, in 2016 there were no applications for skill recognition by BIPs. A more effective use of the available interpretation services provided at the Information Centre for Immigrants should be encouraged in the assessment process, and the fees should be waived at least for those BIPs who have just arrived and are still registered as unemployed or as job-seekers.
The State Employment Agency has been active in building contacts with employers. There are several available support mechanisms for employers in the form of subsidised employment or on-the-site language training. However, several of the cases where employers were willing to hire BIPs specifically have not been successful in the long run, mostly due to BIPs engaging in secondary movement and leaving Latvia. This has been linked with many facets of the integration process, including the unwillingness to work for the salary that was offered. This kind of experience discourages these and other employers from hiring other BIPs in the future and impairs the chances for newly arrived BIPs to find better paid employment. Attempts to ensure a better fit between employees and employers are carried out through the introduction of one-to-one mentorship and language learning on the site, which may lead to a higher retention rate in the future. On the other hand, private sector employers are not always keen to engage in the rather bureaucratised support programmes offered by the State Employment Agency, and other incentives could be offered to employers who hire BIPs, similar to those accompanying employment of other vulnerable persons.

Another venue to promote employment of BIPs would be to promote entrepreneurship among migrant and BIP communities themselves. Currently, there is no targeted support for prospective entrepreneurs among BIPs as skill development, assistance for drafting a business plan or financial or logistical support is provided. Such services are available to BIPs as part of general entrepreneurship support schemes (also for social enterprises or start-ups).

In general, the employment support activities introduced in the Action Plan should be implemented in the future as well to build on the acquired experience and contacts with employers. If the Action Plan continues to serve as the main policy planning document for socioeconomic inclusion of BIPs, more monitoring and impact-
assessment elements should be included in order to create a more comprehensive approach to labour market inclusion of BIPs. As an alternative, a formal strategy including all these elements could be developed by the Ministry of Welfare or BIPs could be included as one of the target groups of Guidelines for Inclusive Employment 2015-2020\(^{31}\) in the next planning period. That would also allow for measures to raise awareness on the specific challenges of BIPs with regard to labour market integration. Since June 2018, there has been a public campaign geared at sensitising employers across sectors about the situation of BIPs and targeting prejudices and perceptions among them, specific support to prospective employers, as well as support mechanisms for diversity management for employers hiring BIPs will be available in the framework of a project “Diversity Promotion”, and such activities should become a part of the government’s strategy aimed at maximising employment among BIPs.

**Recommendations**

1. **Promote early integration** in the labour market even before BIPs have acquired basic language skills by raising awareness among employers and the wider society on the role of employment in learning the language over time.
2. **Encourage the participation** of employers in subsidised work-place programmes by decreasing the administrative burden associated with securing such work-places.
3. **Continue developing programmes** for learning the Latvian language at the work-place and promote the introduction of such programmes as part and parcel of wider diversity management and corporate social responsibility strategies.

\(^{31}\) [Available here](#)
ACCESS TO VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

Graph No. 9: BIPS Receiving Vocational Education in 2016*

As discussed in the previous section on employment, the recognition of existing skills is challenging, and the discrepancy between the said skill level and the employment acquired tends to be high at times. Vocational training is critical in addressing issues such as re-skilling or up-skilling to match the skills of BIPs to the needs of the labour market. This is recognized in the Action Plan by highlighting the need to provide measures for increasing the competitiveness of BIPs, such as vocational education, through orientation and individualized support provided by consultants at the State Employment Agency, starting already during the asylum procedure. Moreover, BIPs have been recognized as one of the priority target groups for Latvia’s lifelong learning programme introduced in 2017 and specifically designed diversity promotion programmes encourage employers to hire and train BIPs. Thus, they are integrated in the existing support programmes that promote employment, inter alia, through vocational training and employment-related education.

32 See more here.
And, indeed, BIPs have the same access to vocational training as nationals: those unemployed or registered as job-seekers have access to Latvian language classes for a maximum of 360h per year and 720h in total, as well as other vocational training at a maximum of 960h per year. Those employed have access to lifelong learning courses of various lengths.

The support program for the employment of BIPs is coordinated by the State Employment Agency (SEA). They procure all service providers for language classes and vocational training but remain in charge of setting the principles and identifying the needs for this support program. SEA has developed mechanisms for communication with employers regarding their needs, as well as internal standard operating procedures for information circulation among the branches of SEA. Regional branches of SEA are prepared to provide support to BIPs and their potential employers, but this has not yet been tested in practice, as all members of the target group in the reporting period had registered in the Riga branch of the State Employment Agency, which is also the coordinating institutions for the project “Integration of refugees and persons with alternative status in the labour market of Latvia”. The services provided for BIPs are evaluated together with similar services provided to other target groups by the State Employment Agency.

Thus, the planning and coordination of vocational training for BIPs is interlinked with the general approach to the labour market integration of this target group. Nevertheless, there are a few obstacles. Vocational training through SEA is accessible after registering as unemployed or as a job seeker. That is done in line with the adapted strategy for employment promotion. However, all the vocational training at SEA is provided only in Latvian in accordance with the Official Language Law, and newcomers do not possess the necessary language knowledge to take part in this training. As a result, primary employment related education is thus also focused on acquiring Latvian language skills. Besides, the waiting times for various trainings at SEA, including for Latvian language lessons, can even reach 45 working days. That further delays the moment a BIP can enter the labour market. While there have been some attempts by the SEA to create specifically targeted qualification courses, for example, by combining a small group of BIPs from the same country and providing them basic training for construction work, this is not a permanent solution and fails to address the underlying issue of the language barrier. Overcoming this challenge would require SEA or its contracted service providers to make better use of the interpretation services available or earmark funding for providing such translation during the classes.
Another challenge is the lack of support for BIPs with special reception needs. They are integrated in the existing general support schemes for vulnerable groups, and it means that groups of special concern, especially women, single parents or victims of trauma are not provided with any targeted efforts to ensure their access to vocational education, while elderly, people with disability or minors who are among those targeted in other programmes, are unable to access the specialized courses due to language limitations. Overcoming this challenge would require targeted efforts with vocational training programmes created specifically for BIPs with special reception needs.

**Recommendations**

1. Promote the use of interpretation services during vocational training courses in order to ensure true access of BIPs to vocation education.
2. Introduce tailored and targeted vocational training modules for BIPs with special reception needs, based on individual assessment and using existing support mechanisms for employment promotion of vulnerable groups.
3. Develop partnerships with employers in order to develop vocational training modules for BIPs that directly correspond to labour market needs.
Access to Health Care

Access to health care is among the most basic and the most crucial needs of any person and being in good health is a significant precondition for a successful process of integration in the host society. This section looks at the access to health care services for BIPs according to the law and in practice as it was on 1 January 2017. The Action Plan for Movement and Admission in Latvia of Persons who Need International Protection emphasised the need to provide health care to BIPs, but there is no specifically targeted policy developed for healthcare provision to BIPs, nor are there specialised monitoring and review activities carried out for this target group.

According to Medical Treatment Law, the amount of medical treatment services paid from the State basic budget and from the funds of the recipient of services in accordance with the procedures stipulated by the Cabinet shall be provided to, inter alia, Latvian citizens, TCNs with permanent residence permit in Latvia, and refugees and persons who have been granted subsidiary protection status. Cabinet Regulations No.1529 “Procedures for Health Care Organisation and Funding” stipulates that asylum seekers are exempt from patient co-payment and can receive health care services funded from the state budget.

Asylum seekers can receive emergency health care, labour care, urgent dental care, child health care, primary health care (general practitioner), reimbursable medication or medical devices, psychiatric help, prenatal care, and other secondary health care if deemed to be urgent, as well as services provided in the Epidemiological Safety Law and medication for treating tuberculosis. Recognized refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection have access to all the same health care services available to nationals and permanent residents. The main obstacles to accessing health care deal not with the coverage, but rather with the waiting lists for state-funded health care.

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33 It must be noted that a new Law on Health Care Funding entered into force on 1 January 2018, that might introduce some changes in the following stages of the assessment.
34 Available here
35 Health services for asylum seekers were funded from the emergency budget, according to Cabinet Regulations Nr. 589 (11.10.2016), Nr. 777 (20.12.2016) and Nr. 120 (14.03.2017). In 2016, the expenses amounted to EUR 30505. According to the Ministry of Health, acquiring data on services accessed by and funded for recognized refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection is hampered by technical difficulties, so no data is currently available.
36 Free dental care is only available for extractions and similar basic treatments, which means that most of the time BIPs can only receive dental care if they can afford it, which, given the already low social allowance and high dental care costs is unlikely. The emergency dental care procedures can have a negative effect on an individual’s self-esteem and may negatively impact their job prospects in the future. Currently, community organisations gather donations to help BIPs in accessing dental care.
services; however, it is no different than for nationals. In addition, those services that are tied to having registered their place of residence at the municipality for a certain period of time may be delayed (i.e. elderly care).

BIPs are informed about their rights to health care services through social workers and social mentors in their face-to-face meetings already during the asylum procedure. Moreover, for the duration of this service, social mentors also help arranging visits to the doctor and assist with arranging for interpreters. In general, information on the services available is provided via brochures or specific websites such as [www.beglis.lv](http://www.beglis.lv) or [http://patverums-dm.lv/en/information-centre-for-immigrants](http://patverums-dm.lv/en/information-centre-for-immigrants).

The Asylum Law establishes an individual assessment of a person’s health and reception needs that should lead to a regularly monitored and evaluated healthcare support throughout the reception phase. This assessment usually takes place upon arrival - on the same day. There is a doctor and a nurse available at the temporary reception centre “Mucenieki”. The access to necessary healthcare is then facilitated with the help of social mentors and social workers, as noted above. Care in case of some special reception needs is included in the coverage for BIPs: paediatric care for minors, care for minors who have been victims of any form of abuse or trauma, care relating to pregnancy and childbirth, care for physically or mentally handicapped persons, nursing care for elderly persons (not provided to asylum seekers)\(^\text{37}\) and psychiatric and psychosocial care for victims of torture, rape or other forms of trauma.

At the same time, the current process of identifying special reception needs related to health care is faulty, as discussed in the section analysing the impact of reception on integration. While there is a set requirement of medical examinations and procedures that all new asylum seekers are put through, these seem to be very mechanical and lack an interpreter who would allow asylum seekers to communicate any potential problems that they might have. The border guards who conduct the initial interview, as well as immigration officers, social workers and social mentors who have regular contact with asylum seekers have had limited training on how to identify these needs. This is especially problematic for individuals who have suffered severe trauma, including victims of sexual assault, human trafficking or similar abuse, who then do not receive appropriate help. Several BIPs have also complained about the inability to

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\(^{37}\) Elderly care depends on the support provided by each municipality, persons need to be registered at the municipality (thus, asylum seekers are not eligible), and the amount of financial support is tied to a person’s income. Hence, the de facto access to this service might be limited.
acquire treatment for specific diseases. Overcoming this challenge would require significant improvements in the asylum seeker screening methodology, including seminars and trainings for the professionals involved.

In addition, currently access to psychological and psychiatric help is limited for BIPs despite the legal framework. While there are currently two social workers available in the temporary reception centre, they lack the capacity and appropriate training to identify special reception needs and facilitate the reception of psychological or psychiatric help that may be required in cases of severe trauma. And while currently there is also a dedicated psychologist available, by early 2017 their services had been used only once. This seems to be because of a language barrier, as a necessity for a translator during a session can be a significant deterrent for people potentially seeking help, as well as an initial lack of trust towards social workers in the host country. Similarly, a year after receiving status of international protection the services of social workers and social mentors are no longer available, and the only option becomes a psychologist available through municipal services whose help again is limited by the two problems highlighted above.

**Graph No. 10: Share (%) of BIPs with Unmet Medical Needs in 2016**

Data: Providus survey of practitioners. Final estimates based on assessment from 3 practitioners and structured interviews. For all of the groups there was a significant disagreement about the estimate - for asylum seekers the estimates were 0-20%, 41-60% and 61-80%, for BIPs - 0-20%, 41-60% and 61-80%. Since a doctor has been available in the temporary reception center only starting 2017, the estimate for asylum seekers is unlikely to be as small as 0-20%. Health care for beneficiaries is limited by structural issues of health care system in Latvia, which often includes long queues for specialized services.

It is said that between 41-60% of beneficiaries of international protection had unmet medical needs in 2016. The language barrier has been identified as an obstacle to accessing all types of health care. While interpretation services are available, interpreters must be requested for the respective service (ad hoc), and thus they may not always be available. Social mentors may then assist during the visit. Society
“Shelter “Safe House”” ensures interpretation services in the framework of an agreement concluded with the Ministry of Culture. Interpretation services are available both for BIPs (when accessing services) and professionals working with TCNs, including medical professionals. In addition, refugees’ actual access to health care is reportedly hampered by instances of intolerant attitudes, exhibited, inter alia, by medical personnel. There has been no specific training for medical personnel on working with BIPs, which may lead to limited information about the entitlements and the specific limitations of BIPs’ healthcare needs as well as limited understanding of intercultural differences especially important in the sensitive situations of healthcare provision.

**Recommendations**

1. **Improve the methodology** for screening and assessing health care needs of asylum seekers, including seminars and trainings for the border guards, immigration officers, social workers and social mentors.

2. **Train the medical personnel** on working with BIPs, to improve the available information about the entitlements and the specific limitations of BIPs’ healthcare needs as well as to increase the awareness and understanding of intercultural differences especially important in the sensitive situations of healthcare provision.
SOCIAL SECURITY OF BIPs

Access to social security services and benefits for BIPs is regulated by the Law on Social Services and Social Assistance, Law on State Social Insurance, Law on State Social Allowances, and Support for Unemployed Persons and Persons Seeking Employment Law, as well as respective municipality binding rules. According to the Action Plan, access to state social services is guaranteed to BIPs, mainly after receiving status of a recognized refugee or of subsidiary protection. During the reception phase, asylum seekers receive an introduction to the social security system in Latvia, as well as may receive social assistance from the municipality with regards to the education of minors. The type and range of social services available to BIPs depends on the type of their residence permit (permanent or temporary), on their registered place of residence (municipal assistance) or on their employment status (if services are tied to tax contributions related to income). Hence, even though the same general conditions exist for nationals as well, some of the conditions for accessing social assistance cannot be met by BIPs as newcomers.

All BIPs are eligible for a monthly sustenance allowance, amounting to EUR 139 for the first member of the family and EUR 98 for all other members of the family. During the reporting period, recognized refugees had the right to such a monthly benefit for 12 months, and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection - for 9 months. According to the most recent amendments to the Asylum Law in 2017, a recognized refugee has the right to receive the benefit for 10 months, and a person with subsidiary protection status - for 7 months during the twelve-month period from the day of acquisition of the status of international protection, as a new one-off financial support payment was introduced.

In general, recognized refugees have access to all social assistance services to the same extent as locals, as they hold a permanent residence permit. Beneficiaries of subsidiary protection are eligible for assistance for guaranteed minimum income (GMI), shelter services, benefits conditional on previous income and consultations at

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38 Available here
39 Available here
40 Available here
41 Available here
42 Support for GMI is available if the income for each family member for the last three months does not exceed EUR 128.06, according to the Regulations Regarding the Recognition of a Family or Person Living Separately as Needy. Available here. GMI support is administered by the local municipality and depends on the assessment of the municipal social worker.
the local social service. Unemployment benefits for all BIPs, as well as other forms of social assistance are conditional to previous employment and remuneration (employment support activities are available also before being employed in Latvia for the first time). The types of social security allowances that can be received by all BIPs if a person has been or is legally employed include unemployment benefits, sickness benefits, maternity or paternity benefits, retirement or disability pensions, benefits in case a person has lost the ability to work. The most significant difference between the various categories of BIPs is due to the type of residence permit they hold - essentially, recognized refugees have access to state social security allowances as family allowance (amount depends on the number of minor children), support in case their child has a disability, childcare allowance (EUR 171 until the child is 18 months old, EUR 42.69 from 18-24 months of age), as state disability benefits.43 These differences are critical and directly impact the integration outcomes of BIPs in Latvia. As noted before, most BIPs receive the status of subsidiary protection, which means that in fact the majority of BIPs must rely on the low monthly sustenance benefit and in the initial stages of living in Latvia when the most intensive support for integration is necessary, they live on the threshold of poverty. Families with children or with persons who require additional care are not eligible for additional support if they hold the status of subsidiary protection. In order to address this challenge, linking the state support to the status of international protection in addition to the type of residence permit is suggested.

In addition to financial benefits available, BIPs have access to the services of social workers and social mentors for 3 months during the asylum process and for 12 months after receiving status is provided at the region or city of residence (currently - in Riga and Jelgava). This service is included in the Action Plan as one of the core support mechanisms of socio-economic inclusion and was created upon Latvia’s decision to participate in the EU Relocation Programme. The number of social workers and social mentors employed depends on the number of BIPs and the complexity of their needs, thus there are no waiting lines and the service is available as needed. However, this service is not mandatory - if an asylum seeker or a person who has already received the status of international protection does not find it necessary, they are not obliged to set up an individual socio-economic inclusion plan. Social workers and social mentors assist in the initial adaptation period with daily tasks, job search, access to services and assistance. Each BIP meets with their social worker in the first days after

43 A visual depiction of these differences is available here.
arrival and an individual socioeconomic inclusion plan is set up. Social worker should meet with their clients on a regular basis to assess the progress of the plan. Social mentors, in turn, serve more as assistants and mediators in addressing everyday issues, ensuring cooperation with other institutions, accompanying BIPs to various institutions and organisations (and ensuring the presence of an interpreter if needed) to access services, consultations and assistance, assisting in settling formalities (ID cards, registration and the employment service etc), helping finding accommodation and so on. Thus, a systematic provision of face-to-face information on social assistance available is ensured through this service. This service is implemented in the framework of an ESF-funded project “Diversity Promotion” that is coordinated by the Society Integration Foundation, and the provision of this service is publicly procured. Hence, so far there have been two organisations that have provided the services of social workers and social mentors - Latvian Red Cross (from April 2016 until November 2016 and currently, since June 2018) and Association “Shelter ‘Safe House” (from December 2016 until April 2018).

Other institutions responsible for the provision of social assistance - mainly municipal social services - are not always aware of the specific entitlements of BIPs, as in the reporting period there were no support activities in dealing with this particular target group, not in the form of written guidelines, nor in the form of trainings and information sessions. It might be explained by the concentration of BIPs in a few municipalities, but it hampers the quality of assistance provided as specific knowledge of the needs and characteristics of this target group is lacking.

Overall, while BIPs are integrated into the existing social support system, they lack a targeted social support system. Essentially, the sole targeted social service is that of social workers and social mentors, but the assistance they provide is still in the context of other types of support available. The fact that the availability of social assistance is conditional on the type of residence permit, length of residence in a municipality or previous employment, seems to not take into account the specific characteristics of this group. Indeed, not addressing or limiting support for the most pressing needs of BIPs, especially social security or even special reception needs (think of the limited access to state support for those caring for family members with disability, for example) hinders the full-fledged embarkation of BIPs in other integration support activities, such as language learning or employment. As a result, practitioners have estimated that almost all BIPs who have requested state support and the services of
Graph No. 11: Share (%) of BIPs below risk-of-poverty in 2016

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Below risk-of-poverty / Have an income from private/employment sources AND social transfers/support</th>
<th>Below risk-of-poverty / Have an income from private/employment sources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%</td>
<td>0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data: Providus survey of practitioners.

Social workers and social mentors live at a risk of poverty. By not adapting the rules of access to some forms of social assistance by taking into account the specific characteristics of this group, the current regulation has thus predisposed the BIPs for precarity in the host society.

Recommendations

1. Develop a targeted social security support system that takes into account the specific characteristics and needs of BIPs.
2. Diminish the differences in services and support available by defining all BIPs as eligible for support associated with permanent residence permit.
3. Increase the capacity of municipal social workers to create a system of continuous, comprehensive social assistance beyond the project-based support of social workers and social mentors.
Access to Education

Graph No. 12: Asylum Seekers and BIPs (under 25) Enrolled in Education in 2016*

[Bar graph showing enrollment by gender and level of education.]

* Data: Ministry of Education and Science.

BIPs’ right to education is stipulated in the Asylum Law and the Education Law, and is equal to that of a citizen of Latvia. The Action Plan further emphasises the responsibility of the Ministry of Education and Science to secure access to education for BIPs. A minor asylum seeker and a minor who has been granted refugee or

Graph No. 13: Asylum Seekers and BIPs (under 25) Participation in Introductory Language and Social Orientation Class in 2016

[Circle graph showing participation.]

* Data: Ministry of Education and Science.

44 Available here
subsidiary protection status is provided with opportunities for acquiring education in the official language - Latvian - in a State or municipal educational institution. Enrolment of children in education from the age of 5 to the age of 18 is mandatory. However, no specifically targeted education programmes have been developed. The Education Law requires developing individual study plans for BIPs and only if more than 10 such children study in one school, a specific programme will be developed for their education and social integration. The only type of targeted education for BIPs is the Latvian language training provided at the temporary reception centre, as well as some additional support for acquiring country-specific knowledge in schools, if deemed necessary.

Cabinet Regulations Nr.488 “Procedure for ensuring education opportunities for unaccompanied minors” describe the procedure for developing individual study plans or specialized study plans for groups. Cabinet Regulations Nr.591 “Procedures for Enrolling Students in and Discharging from General Educational Institutions and Special Pre-school Educational Groups” describe the process of assessing of the existing educational level of a student and their enrolment. In addition, they determine the order for providing additional support for the improvement of Latvian language skills and acquisition of the study subjects “Latvian language” or “Literature”, or “Latvian language and literature”, “Social sciences”, “History of Latvia”, and also for the acquisition of those study subjects that differ in Latvia and in the educational programme previously attended by the student. Thus, the state provides nation-wide criteria to assess their level of education and prior learning; guidelines for assessments where documentary evidence from the country of origin is unavailable; measures to avoid children having to change their place of schooling during the asylum procedure and a mechanism to monitor the placement of these children in “special needs” schools (i.e. those intended for children with learning disabilities). The state cannot, however, always ensure that these assessments are provided with the appropriate translation or in the first language of the child. That is secured through other services, for example, the interpretation services provided by “Shelter ‘Safe House’”, but that might involve several intermediary languages.

In practice it takes up to 30 days for BIPs to be enrolled in general education institutions. Schools and universities receive ad hoc support from the Latvian Language Agency and Ministry of Education and Science regarding the organization of the study process of BIPs. Schools, in turn, are required to send in the individual study plans prepared for asylum seekers to the Ministry of Education and Science for
review. Regular monitoring of the process in general education schools is pursued by the Ministry. In addition, schools are regularly sent information on the education entitlements and specific limitations of persons seeking or benefiting from international protection and have the obligation to further inform their staff. However, no public campaigns are in place to increase the awareness of the general society about the importance of education for BIPs, thus sometimes schools encounter resistance from other students or their parents regarding enrolling BIPs in the general programmes. The overall spending for the support of enrolment of minors in the general education system in 2016 was EUR 21785 from the state budget.

Access to higher or tertiary education is significantly more challenging for BIPs. The first challenge is the recognition of previous education and skills. Recognition of non-EU education certificates is very complicated and sometimes impossible, and no exemptions exist for BIPs regarding provision of former education documents in order to access tertiary education. The responsible institution - Academic Information Centre - does not have a procedure or experience in recognizing qualifications for BIPs and has struggled to provide quality assessment for foreigners in general. Skills assessment in the workplace, even if available, does not provide grounds for accessing tertiary education. In addition, educational programmes in institutions of higher education established by the State that could be accessed for free shall be implemented in the official language - Latvian. The strict language requirements for state-funded programs in schools and universities, as well as students on scholarships significantly limit BIPs who might not be able to achieve the required level of fluency for years. This means that higher education might only be accessible to BIPs with the means to afford paying for English- or Russian - language programmes in either state or private universities.

Another challenge deals with the potential lack of long-term sustainable pre-school education support. Access to pre-school education was provided on an EU funded project basis for asylum seekers who reside at the temporary reception centre until the end of 2017. Furthermore, it is difficult to access this level of education for children in general, as there are often queues that can last for years in state-funded kindergartens. While it is possible to put your child in a private kindergarten with a subsidy from the municipality, this still can be a burden on the available budget of BIPs. Not being able to send children to a pre-school prevents the enrolment of women in the labour market as they become primary care providers and they are not always eligible for social benefits to support themselves and their children during this time.
period, as discussed in the previous section. This also makes socioeconomic integration in Latvia substantially harder for a large family, which will struggle to sustain themselves if only one parent is employed. Furthermore, access to state-funded pre-school for is critical to ensure that both parents have time to learn the Latvian language and increase their chances to become employed.

Last, but certainly not the least of the challenges, is the lack of preparation of teaching staff in schools. The allocation of children to specific schools is currently managed by the Ministry of Education and Science and is done mostly on the expressed willingness of specific schools to accept BIPs as students. And, while the Ministry does provide the student with basic initial support, including funding for all study materials, and the school with initial support for preparing individual study plans, the teachers who then have to work with students often lack the necessary preparation and qualifications to be able to successfully do so. They may receive training only after the specific student has already arrived at the school. Moreover, there is a lack of materials for work with students with no Latvian language or intermediary language knowledge. Overall, this means that the quality of education BIPs receive is lower than would be possible if adequate training and materials were there, and thus their possibilities to continue their education are limited.

**Recommendations**

1. Improve the system of recognition of non-EU education certificates and introduce exemptions or alternative education and qualification recognition methods for BIPs in cases when former education documents needed to access tertiary education cannot be obtained.
2. Promote the use of individual assistants in general education to encourage the integration of child BIPs in mainstream classes while ensuring the individual support needed.
3. Develop supporting methodological materials for teachers on working with children without an intermediary communication language and train the teachers on using such materials in diverse classrooms.
LANGUAGE AND SOCIAL LEARNING

Learning the Latvian language and social orientation activities are core aspects emphasised for the success of socioeconomic inclusion of BIPs and are crucial for accessing other integration support activities available. Indeed, knowledge of Latvian and of the local culture is significant during the naturalization process, as well as set forth as ground principles for social cohesion in the *Guidelines on National Identity, Civil Society and Integration Policy 2012-2018* and in the Action Plan. At the same time, access to language learning and social learning activities is oftentimes limited due to the availability of courses, the employment status of BIPs and the fact, that targeted courses for BIPs are essentially available only during the asylum process and afterwards they are provided for all TCNs together. The coordinating institution for securing access to these integration support activities is the Ministry of Culture in cooperation with Ministry of Education and Science (language learning), Society Integration Foundation (service of social workers and social mentors) and NGOs (implementing projects for social orientation).

Enrolment in Latvian language classes is possible as soon as asylum seekers have arrived at the temporary reception centre. The Latvian Language Agency was responsible for providing 120 hours of initial Latvian language courses as a part of an AMIF project “Initial language acquisition for asylum seekers”, which lasted from 01.02.2016. - 31.12.2017. The total budget for the project was EUR 251 230 out of which approximately EUR 120 000 were used in 2016, when 218 asylum seekers attended the language courses at the temporary reception centre.

Free of charge Latvian language courses are provided also to recognized refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection with no further obligations attached, meaning that the attendance of such courses is voluntary, and no other service provision is conditional upon that attendance. Latvian language classes are provided through various projects for language acquisition for all TCNs or by registering as unemployed or as job seekers via the State Employment Agency (SEA) that then provides Latvian courses as part of its vocational training program, ensuring up to 720h of language classes on all levels. Participants are placed in language courses according to their needs after an assessment of existing knowledge of the host language, and the curricula are targeted and take into account the specific communication needs of newly arrived BIPs - the so-called survival vocabulary is taught to asylum seekers, and
labour market related vocabulary in courses provided by SEA. The teaching is provided by trained and certified second-language teachers\(^{45}\), and different formats exist to facilitate language learning for different target groups (for example, childcare is provided during the courses for asylum seekers at the temporary reception centre, and recently also on-the-job learning of professional terminology has been introduced by SEA). The targeted courses are regularly evaluated in accordance with the project reporting requirements.

However, the accessibility of all language courses is influenced by the ability to form a learning group, which is often difficult, especially in municipalities outside of the capital, thus increasing the waiting time for accessing language learning by up to 45 working days. The times of the day when classes take place also limit their accessibility for those BIPs already employed. Furthermore, as courses are often funded through various AMIF projects, their continuity cannot always be ensured. As a result, the process of targeted language learning often stops as soon as a BIP starts working, which is likely to harm their long-term integration prospects. Moreover, the pressure to join the labour market as soon as possible due to the low level of financial support from the state delays and impairs language acquisition in a focused manner. In addition, since no adequate housing or financial support is ensured to meet other needs such as adequate diet, it becomes increasingly difficult for beneficiaries to focus on learning a new language, which is a requirement and a necessity for job opportunities and long-term integration.

The outcomes of language learning of BIPs are difficult to assess. After the courses provided by SEA in 2016, only 2 beneficiaries of subsidiary protection passed a language exam - one for A1 and other for B1, while other BIPs who participated in these language courses either did not successfully complete the final exam or completed the course in 2017. If BIPs attend courses with other TCNs, no disaggregated data on their results is collected. However, when trying to estimate the extent to which language courses helped reaching certain goals, it seems that the course targeted especially for asylum seekers leads to better outcomes than the one for BIPs who attended after receiving their status.

\(^{45}\) Since the number of asylum seekers and beneficiaries in the country is small, there are no full-time teachers dedicated specifically to teaching language to asylum seekers and beneficiaries. There are 6 certified teachers who, in addition to third country nationals, also teach Latvian to asylum seekers employed by the Latvian Language Agency. The State Employment Agency, which provides courses for beneficiaries who are unemployed, uses a coupon system, which allows beneficiaries to receive language courses in several privately-run learning centers, and as such, there are no full-time publicly funded staff dedicated to this.
The approach to social learning is twofold. First, there are publicly funded targeted social orientation courses provided for all asylum seekers alike, without particularly targeting special reception needs. These courses are provided free of charge, and participation in these courses is not a precondition for receiving any other type of integration assistance. It must be noted that those BIPs who arrive to Latvia in the framework of the EU Relocation Programme, information on certain aspects of life in Latvia was provided before departing from Greece, Turkey or Italy. After arrival, asylum seekers may enrol in the social orientation courses provided in the framework of an AMIF project “The Support Actions for Persons under International Protection”, implemented by Society “Shelter ‘Safe House’”. The goal of this project is to provide the training courses and information events corresponding to the needs of asylum seekers, thus promoting their integration in the Latvian society. The topics that are covered in the 10 lecture-long course are the following: basic information about Latvia, form of government, history, culture, traditions; practical information about services in Latvia (banking, public transportation, telecommunications, availability of Internet, currency, etc.); information about inclusion in society and principles of non-discrimination; information about the housing market, employment, education system, healthcare system, social assistance and free time activities in different groups of interest.

In the period from July 2016 until September 2017, 461 asylum seekers from 22 different countries participated in publicly funded social orientation courses. Courses
were organised in 17 different groups and translated in up to 14 different languages. Courses encourage interaction with the receiving society through various field trips and introduction to other organisations providing support to BIPs, and are supplemented with additional informational materials, for example publications or online guides. However, the implementation of these social orientation courses sometimes is hampered by the process of interpretation during the classes where important information might get lost in translation if there are several intermediary languages used. Moreover, social orientation courses are currently provided on a project-basis, and the course provider has liberty in designing the content of the course as only overarching themes are pre-defined.

Upon receiving the status of international protection, all BIPs can attend the social orientation courses provided for all third country nationals. These courses are offered sporadically, are usually 28h to 36h long and do not address the specific needs of BIPs in their curricula. However, this should not pose a challenge as most BIPs have attended the targeted social orientation course during the reception phase.

Despite the existing efforts, a very low number of BIPs who participated in publicly funded social orientation programmes in 2016 reported that the programme was very helpful to achieve their goals for socioeconomic inclusion.

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46 See information here.
Second, there are individualized social orientation services available through the service of social workers and social mentors, provided during the 3-month period of initial reception, as well as for up to a year after being granted international protection status. Each BIP is assigned an individual social worker and social mentor who works directly with them starting from their arrival at the temporary reception centre. Assistance provided by social workers and social mentors focuses mostly on practical support - access to banking and allowance payments, visits to doctor, search for housing, which also provides valuable input to social orientation of beneficiaries of international protection. Social mentorship activities are funded by European Social Fund in the framework of the project “Diversity Promotion”, coordinated by the Society Integration Foundation and implemented by NGOs as a result of a procurement procedure. Hence, so far there have been two organisations that have provided the services of social workers and social mentors - Latvian Red Cross (from April 2016 until November 2016 and currently, since June 2018) and Association “Shelter 'Safe House” (from December 2016 until April 2018). This service complements the social learning activities as social workers and social mentors can observe and facilitate the transfer of theoretical knowledge acquired to actual day-to-day situations. However, the one-to-one mentorship for BIPs is currently available only during the first year of residence in Latvia. After this period, it can become increasingly difficult for BIPs to deal with various challenges and problems that were previously assisted by a mentor, including, for example, assistance in negotiations with landlord, or various practical challenges. This is also likely to reduce the capacity of BIPs to be able to participate in long-term socio-economic integration, as it is likely to require continuous encouragement and support. This challenge could be addressed through the introduction of a transition period where the assistance of social workers and social mentors would still be available for a limited number of hours in the second year of residence in Latvia.47

One of the biggest challenges is the lack of a specifically targeted orientation programme for BIPs with special reception needs. While social workers or social mentors provide services on an individual basis taking into account the individual needs of BIPs, including some aspects of social orientation, there are no targeted programs for vulnerable groups. That means that access to information regarding social orientation might be limited due to a person’s health or disability, or the information in courses might not be sensitised for triggers for victims of abuse and trauma. As the number of BIPs in Latvia is rather low, this challenge can be addressed

47 On further shortcomings of the social orientation system, see this PROVIDUS analysis of social orientation activities.
by including such concerns in the design of future social orientation programmes for asylum seekers and by ensuring additional attention to the social orientation needs of this group of BIPs in individual integration plans set up by social workers.

**Recommendations**

1. Develop and implement a curriculum for both language and social orientation courses in order to ensure that the content reflects both the needs of BIPs in the host society, as well as reflects the long-term approach to inclusion in the society.

2. Introduce various course models (varying intensity, times of the day, voucher system for payment, etc.) in order to ease access to language learning for BIPs.

3. Increase the capacity of municipalities in providing services of social workers and social mentors in order to ensure continuous, individualized integration support if necessary.
BUILDING BRIDGES: ENCOURAGING THE ENGAGEMENT OF THE HOST SOCIETY AND THE CIVIC PARTICIPATION OF BIPs

While the Guidelines on National Identity, Civil Society and Integration Policy 2012-2018 view integration as a two-way process, according to the EU guiding principles of integration, the Guidelines did not include BIPs as a specific target group of the policy until 2017 and the Action Plan does not define the roles of the receiving society in facilitating the socioeconomic inclusion of BIPs. Indeed, there are no requirements for the involvement of civil society actors in providing integration support mechanisms. Moreover, even when assessing the implementation of the Guidelines on National Identity, Civil Society and Integration Policy 2012-2018 experts have oftentimes highlighted the limited support to immigrant NGOs or NGOs representing the interests of newcomers.

Only a very small share of BIPs were regularly involved in socio-cultural activities or in NGOs or other voluntary initiatives. This is due to several challenges.

While NGOs do implement some integration support activities as a result of procurements or project contests (i.e. service of social workers and social mentors, social orientation courses, etc.), voluntary NGO activities are not included in the
strategy for BIP integration and are thus not seen by policy makers as completing the support system for newcomers. In fact, no national or local level strategies referring to the interaction of the receiving society with BIPs exists, and the approach of emphasizing language and social learning puts all the burden of societal involvement on the shoulders of BIPs.

If there are project contests open to NGOs to facilitate the reaching of national integration objectives defined in Guidelines on National Identity, Civil Society and Integration Policy 2012-2018, they are aimed at TCNs in general and BIPs are not highlighted as a specific target group. Moreover, though the Ministry of Culture has a consultative body to consult on the implementation of the Guidelines, it has not succeeded in securing the participation of an NGO representing the interests of TCNs in general, and thus also not of BIPs in particular. Both of these groups should be represented in the consultative body in the next policy planning period for a successful engagement of BIPs in the host society and support programme design. Such consultative bodies could also be created in municipalities with larger BIP concentration, primarily Riga and Jelgava.

Most of the activities designed towards encouraging more civic participation among BIPs or ensuring more cultural interaction between Latvians and BIPs have been organized either by local communities or various NGOs which engage in voluntary work focused on integration of BIPs. As such, initiatives that should be funded and organized by the host country are entirely voluntary and self-funded. Projects, such as “The Living Library” implemented by an NGO “I Want to Help Refugees”, during which BIPs can share their stories to a group of listeners in an informal environment, have been entirely community organized and was partially funded by the Riga City Council. Ensuring that similar events and initiatives continue to run and develop should be a key priority for state funding aimed at fostering integration of BIPs. The support for expert NGOs in providing other types of support for integration of BIPs in the fields of employment, social security, education, language learning and so on should become one of the core mechanisms in ensuring a higher accessibility of these activities. However, in the reporting period no targeted support for expert NGOs was envisioned in any of the areas assessed.

Of course, the one-to-one mentorship provided by social workers and social mentors can help building bridges between BIPs and the host society. Indeed, in 2016, 342 BIPs received such assistance. However, these service providers currently focus their work
on helping beneficiaries with practical issues. Resource scarcity and limited integration support available asks for a prioritisation of satisfying basic needs, and civic engagement remains secondary.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. **Increase the support** for immigrant NGOs or NGOs representing interests of various migrant groups, inter alia, BIPs in the integration policy planning in order to encourage the participation of the host society and thus promote integration as a two-way process.

2. **Ensure the representation** of TCNs in general and BIPs in particular in the national and regional consultative bodies for integration policy development and implementation.

3. **Envision funding** for community-organized activities, especially on a local level, that promote interaction between BIPs, other newcomers and the host society.