



# NIEM Evaluation 2

## Latvian integration system

### 2019 – 2021: Stagnation before positive change?

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## Introduction

This report focuses on the implementation of integration policy aimed at the beneficiaries of international protection (hereafter BIPs) in Latvia. It is a result of evaluation of migration policies in the EU Member States conducted as part of the project "The National Integration Evaluation Mechanism (NIEM)."

NIEM is a six-year long transnational project aiming to support the key actors in the field of integration in 14 EU Member States in developing their systems of integration and improving the integration outcomes for persons with international protection.

The main goal of the project is to increase the competence and effectiveness of the institutions involved in the BIP integration. NIEM has established a tool for comprehensive monitoring and evaluation of the integration process. It helps to identify gaps within the legal and policy frameworks of integration and to assess the impact of legislative and policy changes in different countries, as well as to recognise the good practices in different integration systems. NIEM proposes to establish a mechanism for a biennial, comprehensive assessment of BIP integration.

The project is based on the assumption that creation of any migration and integration policy should rely on trustworthy data: statistical, legal, administrative, financial and public policy data, as well as on the quantitative and qualitative data gained through surveys, interviews, and focus group discussions with the representatives of target group and the implementers of integration policy. Thus, the aim of this project is to promote evidence-based policy-making. NIEM provides evidence that can serve as a basis for further development of appropriate integration policies in the EU countries.

This report is the outcome of the last of three evaluation rounds, following the NIEM comparative Baseline Report<sup>1</sup> and respective national reports<sup>2</sup> based on data from 2016–2017, and

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<sup>1</sup> Wolffhardt A., Conte C. and Huddleston T. (2019). The European benchmark for refugee integration: Brussels/Warsaw: MPG and IPA. The Baseline Report elaborates on the background, objectives and methodology of NIEM and includes further references.

<sup>2</sup> Wolffhardt, A., Conte. C. (2020). The European benchmark for refugee integration: A comparative analysis of the National Integration Evaluation Mechanism in 14 EU countries. Brussels/Warsaw: MPG and IPA.

the NIEM comparative Evaluation 1 Report<sup>3</sup> and respective national reports in 2020,<sup>4</sup> based on data obtained in 2017-2019.

This report is addressed to public administration professionals and decision makers, representatives of academic and applied research centres, think tanks, non-governmental organizations, and to everyone else interested in or dealing with migration and integration issues. We hope that the report will arise interest and provide a good basis for enlarging knowledge, continuing discussions and creating a better policy for integration.

## 1. Main trends since the Evaluation 1 report

The period from 2019-2021 was characterised by an overall stagnation in terms of legal and policy framework and collaborative implementation of integration policy, a backdrop against which two largely unexpected upheavals - Covid-19 pandemic and the influx of irregular migrants into Latvia through Belarus - took place. These unfolding crises highlighted the long-standing challenges of integration in Latvia, such as difficulties in securing housing, obtaining education, employment and equal social support.

Yet some positive legislative and policy changes had long been brewing and came to fruition towards the very end of or beyond the period of current evaluation (i.e. 31 March 2021). They provide a basis for further improvements of the BIP integration system as set out in the Action Plan for Movement and Admission in Latvia of Persons who Need International Protection,<sup>5</sup> the 2019-2020 Plan for the Implementation of National Identity, Civil Society and Integration Policy,<sup>6</sup> and the 2021-2023 Plan for the Development of a Cohesive and Civically Active Society.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Wolffhardt, A., Conte. C. (2020) The European Benchmark for Refugee Integration: A Comparative Analysis of the National Integration Evaluation Mechanism in 14 EU countries. Brussels/Warsaw: MPG and IPA. See <http://www.forintegration.eu/pl/pub>.

<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.forintegration.eu/pl/pub>.

<sup>5</sup> Order of the Cabinet of Ministers No.759 "Action Plan for Movement and Admission in Latvia of Persons who Need International Protection", 2 December 2015, [available here](#).

<sup>6</sup> Order of the Cabinet of Ministers No.72 "On the 2021-2027 Guidelines for the Development of a Cohesive and Civically Active Society," [available here](#).

<sup>7</sup> Order of the Cabinet of Ministers No.32, "On the 2021-2023 Plan for the Development of a Cohesive and Civically Active Society," [available here](#).

This report outlines the main trends in the legal and policy framework for integration and its implementation since 2019. It proceeds with analysis of long-term implications of the existing policy through the lens of the Covid-19 pandemic as experienced by BIPs.

For a comprehensive overview of Latvia's policy towards the reception and integration of BIPs since 2015, read the [Baseline Assessment](#)<sup>8</sup> and the [Evaluation 1 Report](#).<sup>9</sup> For comparative reports across 14 EU countries and national reports outlining the state of affairs in each of these countries developed under the NIEM project, visit [www.forintegration.eu](http://www.forintegration.eu).

## Asylum Dynamics 2019-2021

The number of asylum applications in Latvia remained relatively low in 2019, reflecting a general decrease across the European Union. The majority of asylum seekers came from Azerbaijan, Russia, India, Georgia and Ukraine.<sup>10</sup> Of 178 asylum applications in total, 51 or 28.6 % resulted in either a refugee status (37 cases) or a subsidiary status (14 cases). The year 2020 saw a further decrease in asylum seekers, caused largely by the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic and the closure of internal and external borders by many EU countries. In total, 147 asylum requests were submitted, and 25 or 17% resulted in either a refugee status (8 cases) or subsidiary status (17 cases). Majority of asylum seekers came from Belarus, Russia and Syria. Priority was given to asylum applications filed by persons arriving from Belarus due to the post-election crackdown on peaceful protests in Belarus from August 2020 onwards.

The situation changed drastically in 2021 when the asylum requests increased almost four times compared to the previous year. Altogether 582 applications were filed, the highest number since 1998 when the registration of asylum applications started in Latvia. The sharp increase was caused by the arrival of irregular migrants, mostly from Iraq, but also from Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Syria, Turkey and some other countries through

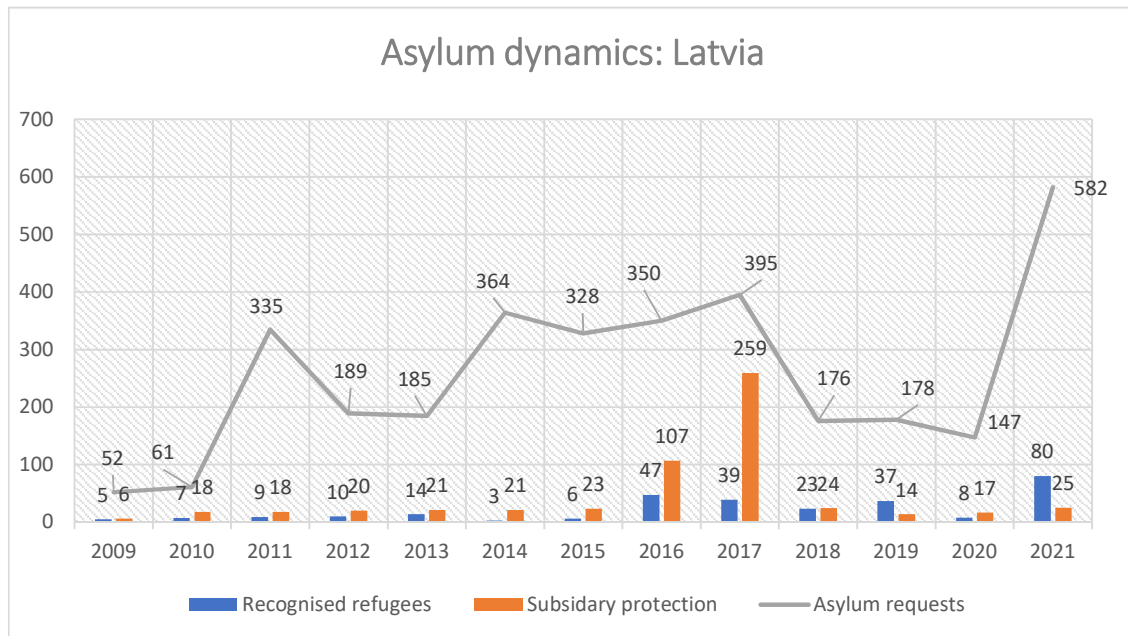
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<sup>8</sup> Lāce, A., R.F.Geks. (2018) [Measuring and Improving Integration of Beneficiaries of International Protection. Baseline Assessment: Latvia](#). Centre for Public Policy PROVIDUS.

<sup>9</sup> Lāce, A., Šuvajevs, A. (2020). [NIEM Evaluation 1: Towards or against systemic support for integration? Case of Latvia](#). Centre for Public Policy PROVIDUS.

<sup>10</sup> Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs (OCMA). Statistics: [Asylum Seekers](#).

Belarus, encouraged by Lukashenko regime that lured newcomers on tourist visas with a promise of easy transit to the EU countries.<sup>11</sup> From the end of July 2021 until 11 August when the state of emergency came into force in Latvia's border areas with Belarus, effectively halting the acceptance of asylum applications there, more than 340 people had crossed the border irregularly. In total 368 asylum requests were filed by persons who had arrived in Latvia in an irregular way via Belarus; yet only three of them (0.008 %) were satisfied by granting status of international protection.<sup>12</sup> The annual approval rate was however 21.4%: of 582 applications, 80 resulted in a refugee status, and 25 in a subsidiary protection status in Latvia.



Source: [Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs](#)

Secondary movement remained a challenge despite restrictions introduced to curb the Covid-19 pandemic across the EU. Most of the asylum seekers who arrived crossing the Latvian-Belarus border in summer 2021 left the asylum seekers' reception centre "Mucenieki" without waiting for the outcome of their applications and were later apprehended in other EU countries,

<sup>11</sup> A more detailed analysis of the influx of irregular migrants across the EU external (Latvian and Lithuanian) border with Belarus and subsequent actions of the involved governments, as well as the legal and policy implications of this crisis will be offered in a joint comparative report by PROVIDUS and the Lithuanian non-governmental organisation *Diversity Development Group* in May 2022.

<sup>12</sup> According to the information provided by the OCMA to the governmental cross-sectoral Operative Management Centre to deal with the influx of irregular migrants across the Latvian-Belarusian border and in direct communication.

mainly Germany. The authorities of these countries filed readmission requests, and 33 asylum seekers were returned to Latvia in accordance with the Dublin regulation in 2021.<sup>13</sup> Many readmission requests are still pending.

The tendency to leave Latvia for other EU countries continued also among people who had already received the status of international protection in Latvia. The State Border Guard received requests for the readmission of 95 BIPs and four BIP children without the status from other EU countries in 2020-2021. Of them only 17 BIPs, including one child without the, were actually readmitted during this time-period.<sup>14</sup>

Returned BIPs faced the same challenges as in the previous evaluation phase, described in the Evaluation 1 Report. Namely, it was difficult for them to find housing, especially in under the Covid-19 circumstances, ensure education for children and access social support. The renewal of identity documents and temporary residence permits still implied paying fines for non-renewal although in practice the requirement to pay fines was mostly cancelled by OCMA employees upon provision of relevant explanations.

As before, both those BIPs who had left Latvia soon after acquiring the protection status and those who had partially or fully benefited from the services of social worker and social mentor within one year of acquiring the status were no longer eligible for additional mentoring support. Thus, the returned BIPs had to rely solely on NGO support again.

One returned family with two children found themselves in the same situation as two other returned families in 2019. The family was unable to find a place to live and therefore stayed for three months at the asylum seekers' centre, even though BIPs are not entitled to stay at the centre after receiving the protection status.

As mentioned below, the prolonged stay of BIPs at the centre, practiced as an ad hoc solution though technically illegal, points to systemic problems with housing for BIPs. These problems became particularly visible during the Covid-19

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<sup>13</sup> According to the information provided by the OCMA Asylum Affairs Division in direct communication.

<sup>14</sup> According to the information provided by the State Border Guard in direct communication.

pandemic and the increase in the number of asylum seekers when the capacity of the asylum seekers' centre was exhausted, yet BIPs continued to reside there (see page 19).

## Legislative and policy changes since 2019

As noted above, the period from 2019–2021 was characterised by a general stagnation with regard to legislative and policy framework for integration. Yet it was also a period of continuous discussion and advocacy of some significant changes that were proposed or passed as legislative amendments or policy documents after the cut-off date of the current evaluation and thus were not included in the 2021 NIEM scores for Latvia. This part of report will not only consider the legal and policy framework and the implementation of integration measures during the evaluation period but will also outline the main adjustments introduced later.

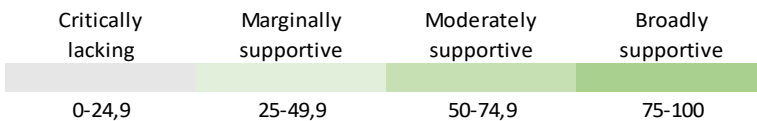
The Action Plan for Movement and Admission in Latvia of Persons who Need International Protection adopted in 2015 and last amended in 2017 continued to serve as the basis for integration system for BIPs. However, one of the coordination mechanisms set out by the Plan and initially viewed as a good practice of mainstreaming – the Working Group at the Ministry of Welfare in charge of socioeconomic inclusion of BIPs – had come to a full stop already in the previous evaluation cycle and did not reconvene during the period under discussion here. As a result, responsibilities of integration support to BIPs remained scattered across several ministries and government agencies: the Ministry of Culture, the Society Integration Foundation (hereafter SIF), the Ministry of Welfare, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Regional Development and some other institutions, with lacking coordination and mainstreaming of integration policies. This set-up prevented finding solutions to such long-standing problems as, for example, securing housing and providing sufficient educational support to the BIPs.

As shown in the table below (see also table on p.12), Latvia scores very low in policy implementation and cooperation. The score is based on the following criteria: the existence of an overall refugee integration policy/strategy; mainstreaming across all relevant policy fields; multi-level and multi-



sectoral coordination with local and regional authorities, social partners and civil society; acknowledgment of integration as a two-way process and support for an active role on the part of the receiving society; encouragement of the participation of BIPs in society and integration policy making. Latvia is among the six project partner countries where policy implementation and cooperation is assessed as critically lacking.

<b>Step: Implementation &amp; Collaboration</b>	
average of all indicators per country	
<b>France</b>	<b>56,4</b>
<b>Sweden</b>	<b>56,0</b>
<b>Lithuania</b>	<b>51,0</b>
<b>Netherlands</b>	<b>40,9</b>
<b>Italy</b>	<b>38,1</b>
<b>Spain</b>	<b>34,5</b>
<b>Czechia</b>	<b>33,5</b>
<b>Greece</b>	<b>30,9</b>
<b>Latvia</b>	<b>24,8</b>
<b>Slovenia</b>	<b>24,3</b>
<b>Romania</b>	<b>13,8</b>
<b>Bulgaria</b>	<b>9,4</b>
<b>Hungary</b>	<b>0,0</b>
<b>Poland</b>	<b>0,0</b>



Comparative data: Migration Policy Group, Brussels. Data visualization: Institute of Public Affairs, Warsaw.

In addition to the effects of lacking coordination, the following developments have led to changes in the NIEM scoring for Latvia:

+ There was a tendency to reduce fees in individual cases of family reunification, for example, by cancelling consular charges for visa applications. Officially, however, fees remained unchanged and relatively high for BIPs.

+ Social assistance became easier to obtain for BIPs at the municipalities with the same criteria and procedures applied as for the nationals. Yet assistance remained largely tied to an officially declared place of residence,

a challenge to many BIPs struggling to secure permanent housing during the initial phase of integration.

+ Amendments to the Law on Social Services and Social Assistance stipulated a one-off allowance from municipality to persons (including BIPs) without a registered place of residence in that municipality. Local governments were also obliged to consider providing psychosocial assistance or granting the necessary social benefits to such persons.

+ Targeted job-seeking support to BIPs, consisting of individual consultations, job placement, Latvian language courses and assistance of the Latvian language mentor at the workplace, was continued by the State Employment Agency (hereafter - SEA). BIPs could also partake in general employment programmes, such as subsidised employment,<sup>15</sup> on-the-job training, and paid temporary public work. SEA's project "Integration of Persons with Refugee and Alternative Status into the Latvian Labour Market" was funded from the state budget.

+ A wide range of vocational training courses were accessible to the unemployed BIPs through the SEA. However, all courses were provided in Latvian, which considerably limited the involvement of BIPs in the training. Similar constraints applied to the life-long learning programme for the employed adults administered by the State Education Development Agency. Although one of the prioritised target groups of the programme, few BIPs could benefit from the initiative due to insufficient knowledge of Latvian.

+ Assistance of social worker and social mentor, available to asylum seekers for 3 months and to BIPs for 12 months after receiving the status of international protection, was continued under the EU-funded project "Diversity promotion" administered by the SIF. The service was implemented by the Latvian Red Cross, succeeded by the NGO "Caritas" after the current evaluation period.<sup>16</sup> The project-based support of social worker and mentor is likely to continue in 2023,

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<sup>15</sup> [Subsidized jobs for the unemployed](#). State Employment Agency, Republic of Latvia. 22.10.2020.

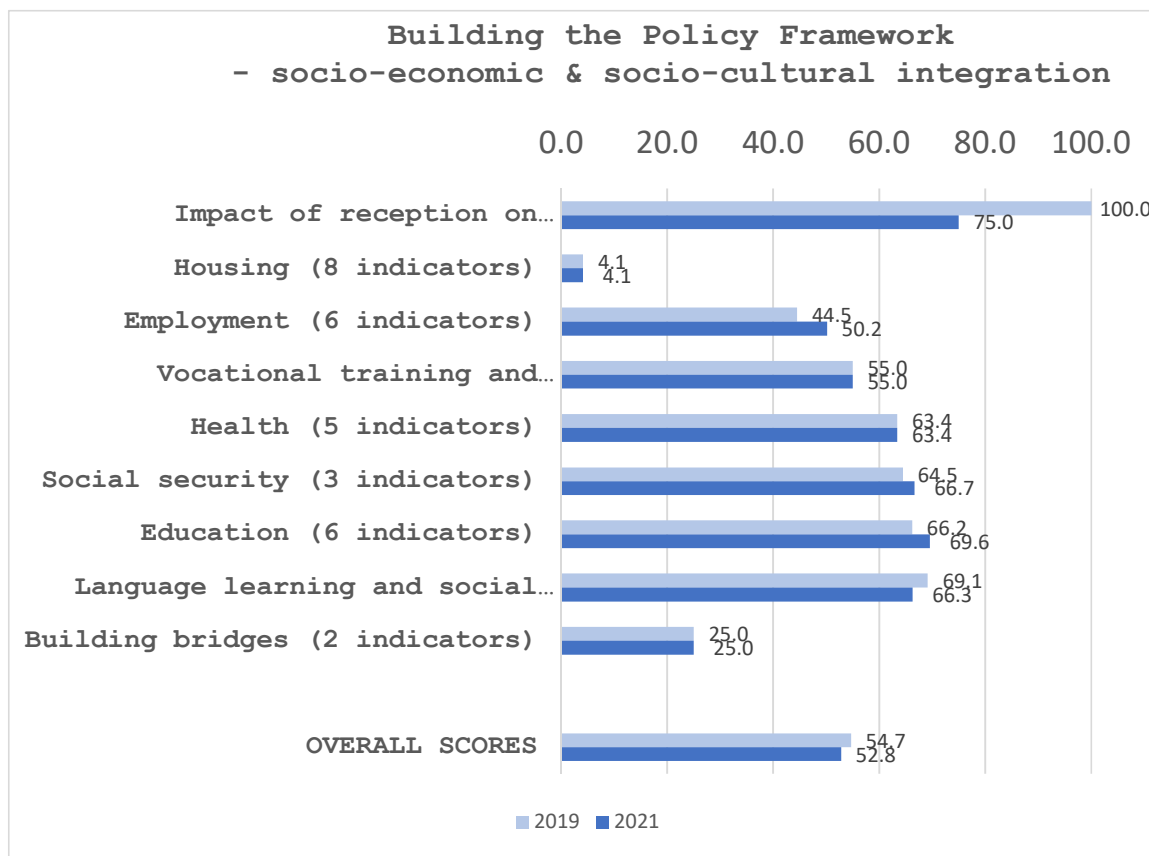
<sup>16</sup> ["Sabiedrības integrācijas fonds uzsāk sadarbību ar Caritas Latvija atbalsta sniegšanai patvēruma meklētājiem un bēgļiem"](#), 1.02.2022.

with the use of funding from the EU the Asylum, Migration, and Integration Fund (AMIF).

+ SIF continued the training programme for business managers and employees aimed at developing diversity management, increasing knowledge on tolerance and preventing discrimination against vulnerable groups, including refugees.

+ Assessments of children's education level during the early reception phase were conducted with appropriate interpretation. Interpreting services were provided by the NGO "Shelter 'Safe House'," using AMIF funding on a project basis.

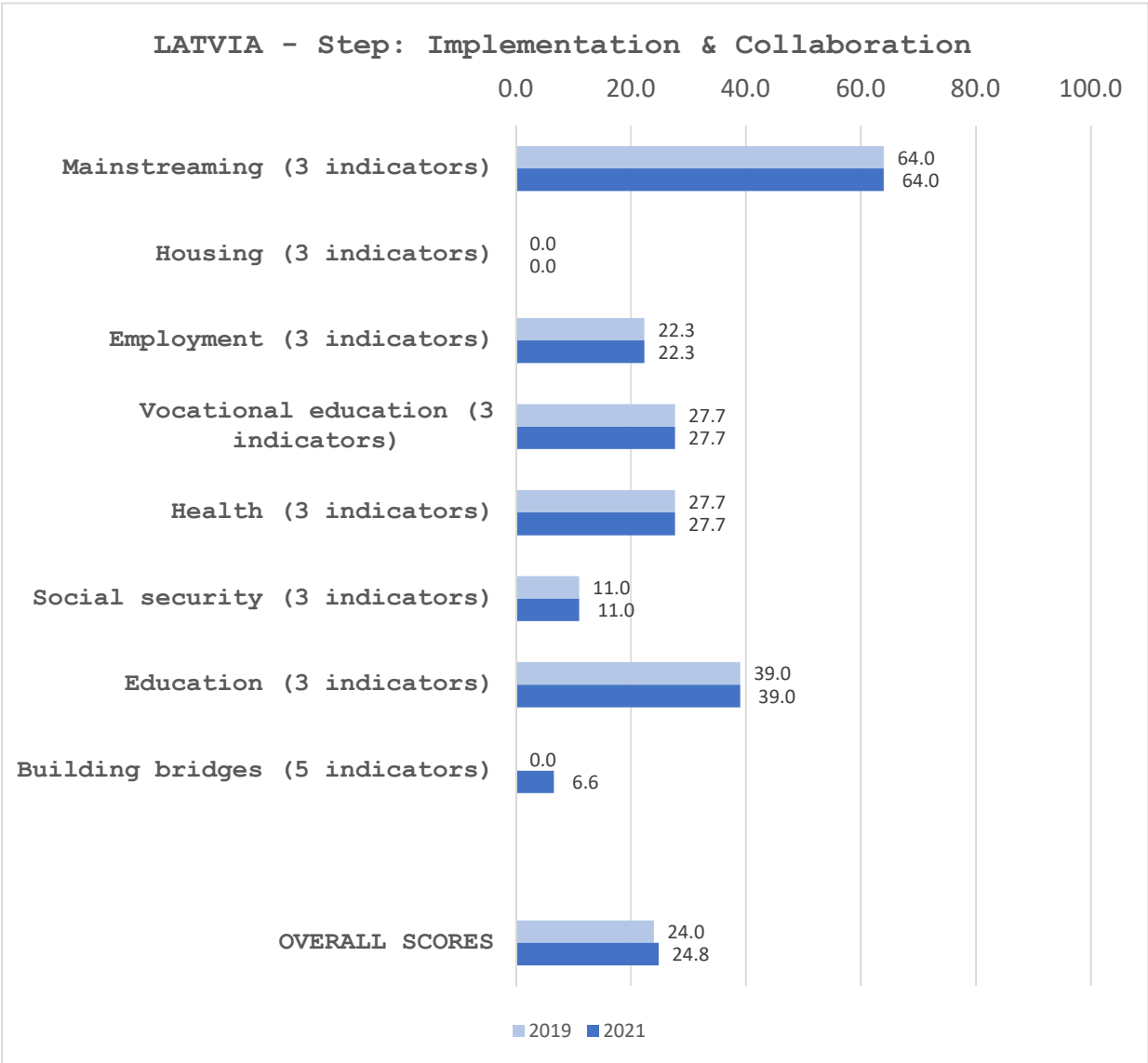
- Additional support measures were lacking for BIPs with special reception needs, such as persons with disability/mental disorders and victims of human trafficking/violence, both during the reception phase and the following period of integration. BIPs with special reception needs did not enjoy favourable procedural rules either; nor did they have specific, targeted language and social orientation courses.



Data analysis: MPG, Brussels. Data visualization: IPA, Warsaw.

- Insufficient measures were available to facilitate language learning for different target groups of BIPs. In particular, there was a lack of flexible timetables for employed BIPs and alternative learning formats for illiterate persons.

+ Project grants were available for NGOs providing various support to BIPs, including voluntary initiatives, through the governmental programme "NGO Fund" administered by the SIF.

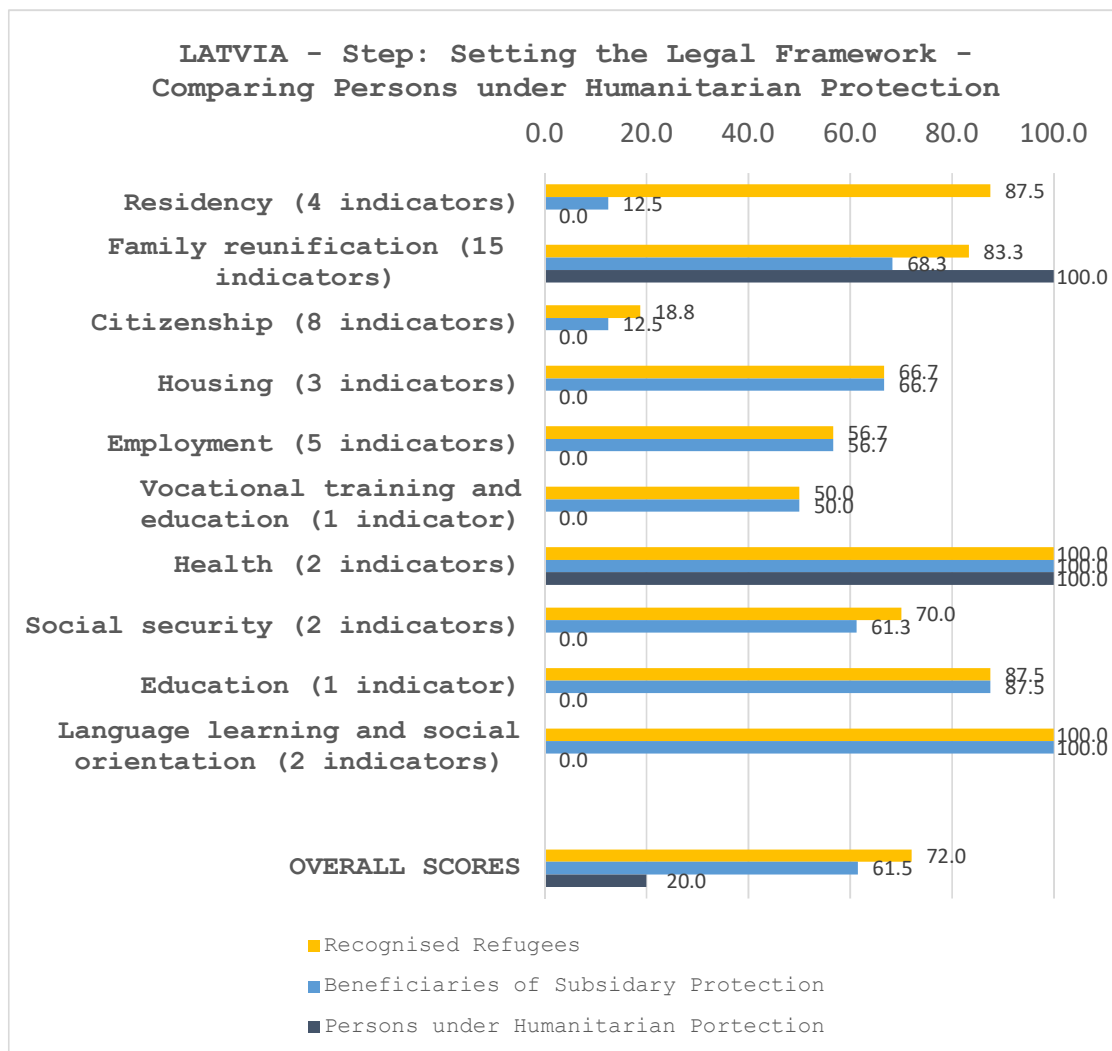


Data analysis: MPG, Brussels. Data visualization: IPA, Warsaw.

A significant disparity remained between support offered to different categories of BIPs, namely, persons with a refugee status (recognised refugees, RRs) and persons with an alternative status in Latvia (beneficiaries of subsidiary protection, BSPs).<sup>17</sup> Family and children-related state social benefits were available only for RRs as

<sup>17</sup> There were no persons under temporary protection in Latvia during the evaluation period. The situation changed drastically with the start of Russia's military aggression in Ukraine in February 2022, which brought more than 20 thousand Ukrainian civilians to Latvia. Ukrainian refugees were granted status of temporary protection and broad support under the [Law on Assistance to Ukrainian Civilians](#) and in accordance with the Latvian [Asylum Law](#) and the [Temporary Protection Directive activated by the EU](#).

permanent residence permit holders, not BSPs as temporary residence permit holders, the only exception being maternity benefit. This disparity became starkly visible during the Covid-19 pandemic when the law "On Countering the Consequences of the Spread of the Covid-19 Infection"<sup>18</sup> was passed granting the so-called one-time "Covid benefits" of 500 EUR for each child and 200 EUR one-time benefits to pensioners and persons with disability and caretakers of children with disability. As these benefits were tied to other state social benefits, BSPs were not eligible for them. The disparity was addressed, though, by amendments to the law passed in December 2021.<sup>19</sup>



Data analysis: MPG, Brussels. Data visualization: IPA, Warsaw.

<sup>18</sup> [Law on the Suppression of Consequences of the Spread of COVID-19 Infection](#). 05.06.2020.

<sup>19</sup> [Amendments to Law on the Suppression of Consequences of the Spread of COVID-19 Infection](#). 16.12.2021.

## Poitive developments beyond the evaluation period:

+ Amendments to the Immigration Law were passed in September 2021, allowing asylum seekers awaiting decisions on their asylum applications to become employed 3 months after submitting their application instead of the previous 6-months limit.<sup>20</sup>

+ Municipal housing assistance (provision of living space, reconstruction) was partly untied from the requirement for an officially declared residence in the assisting municipality by the amendments to the Law on Assistance with Housing Issues passed in December 2021. The law now stipulates that municipalities can provide assistance to RRs and BSPs who do not have an officially declared residence in the municipality in question.<sup>21</sup> Yet municipal housing support to cover rent and utility payments was still conditioned on a declared place of residence in the municipality.

+ BIPs were recognised as a separate target group for more integration measures in the 2021-2023 Plan for the Development of a Cohesive and Civically Active Society.<sup>22</sup> In the 2019-2020 Plan for the Implementation of National Identity, Civil Society and Integration Policy BIPs were mostly included in the joint pool of third country nationals.<sup>23</sup> Specific support measures in the 2021-2023 Plan include Latvian language and integration courses during the early integration phase, Latvian language and integration courses at a later stage of integration, and participation of BIP representatives in the Consultative Council for Third Country Nationals. The Plan was confirmed by the Government at the beginning of 2022.

+ In December 2021, SIF was established as the national coordinating institution for the socioeconomic inclusion of BIPs. A "one stop shop" will be developed under the

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<sup>20</sup> [Amendments to the Immigration Law](#). 13.09.2021.

<sup>21</sup> [Amendments to the Law on Assistance with Housing Issues](#). 08.12.2021.

<sup>22</sup> Order of the Cabinet of Ministers No.32, "On the 2021-2023 Plan for the Development of a Cohesive and Civically Active Society, [available here](#).

<sup>23</sup> Order of the Cabinet of Ministers No.345 "On the 2019-2020 Plan for the Implementation of National Identity, Civil Society and Integration Policy," [available here](#).

auspices of SIF in 2022 and will come into operation in 2023. The main objective of the agency is to coordinate different integration and social inclusion measures for BIPs in cooperation with all the relevant institutions involved. The "one stop shop" will help to offer coherent and qualitative services to BIPs, thus eliminating the problem of so far decentralised and fragmentary assistance to the target group.<sup>24</sup>

+

The inequality between RRs and BSPs in terms of eligibility to state social support was finally eliminated by amendments to the law "On State Social Benefits" in March 2022.<sup>25</sup> The law now stipulates that BSPs are entitled to the same state social benefits (such as state family allowance, childcare benefit, care-for-disabled-child benefit, allowance to a person with disability in need of care, state social security benefit and others) as RRs. These changes followed the above-mentioned amendments to the law "On Countering the Consequences of the Spread of the Covid-19 Infection" in December 2021, which allowed persons with a subsidiary protection status to receive the same "Covid benefits" as granted to persons with a refugee status. The amendments to the State Social Benefits Law, however, will come into force in July 2023.

+

A working group to find systemic solutions to ensure quality education of minor asylum seekers in Latvia was established at the Ministry of Education in December 2021. The group includes representatives of state and municipal educational institutions, several government agencies, and non-governmental institutions.

## 2. Problems highlighted by the Covid-19 pandemic

As in other EU countries, the spread of Covid-19 and measures introduced to reduce its transmission, such as lockdowns, school closures, restrictions of mass gatherings, requirements of social distancing, quarantine of the infected persons and close contacts etc., had a particularly negative impact on groups at

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<sup>24</sup> [SIF is designated as the coordinating body for the socio-economic inclusion of persons in need of international protection.](#) 12.07.2021.

<sup>25</sup> [Amendments to the Law on State Social Allowances.](#) 03.03.2022.



risk of social exclusion, including asylum seekers and BIPs. The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted once again several gaps within the Latvian integration system, leading to additional challenges for newcomers and at times effectively halting the integration process. The following part outlines the main difficulties faced by BIPs under the Covid-19 circumstances.

## Access to information

Extensive restrictions to mitigate the spread of Covid-19 were first introduced in March 2020 when the government declared the state of emergency.<sup>26</sup> Most public services (including education, health and social assistance provided by municipalities) were transferred online. Travel restrictions and requirements for social distancing and quarantine came into force. One of the biggest challenges for BIPs right from the beginning, as well as during the later stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, was access to detailed and up-to-date information regarding the Covid-related rules and restrictions. In a situation of continuous change and adjustment, the authorities were at times struggling to provide the latest consolidated information to the public. Updates would first be available in Latvian, less and with delay in Russian, and much less/later in English. Information in other languages, spoken by BIPs, was virtually non-existent. Asylum seekers at the asylum seekers' reception centre "Mucenieki" received information and instructions from the Latvian Red Cross social mentors. Iconographic posters and flyers were also displayed at the centre. BIPs living outside the centre but still entitled to mentors' assistance (a period of 12 months after receiving a protection status) would similarly rely mainly on the information provided by the Red Cross mentors. BIPs not entitled to state-covered mentorship turned to other NGOs, such as "I Want to Help Refugees" and "Shelter "Safe House"," for information and instructions. "Shelter "Safe House"" prepared information sheets in Arabic, Dari, Turkish, Russian and English languages,<sup>27</sup> while the NGO "MakeRoom" together with "I Want to Help Refugees" ran a campaign on Facebook encouraging newcomers to get vaccinated in spring 2021.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Cabinet Order No. 103, "Regarding Declaration of the Emergency Situation", adopted on 12 March 2020. <https://likumi.lv/ta/en/en/id/313191-regarding-declaration-of-the-emergency-situation>.

<sup>27</sup> See <https://www.integration.lv/lv/covid-19>

<sup>28</sup> See <https://fb.watch/c3MqNT9kcU/>

## Covid-19 outbreaks at the asylum seekers' reception centre "Mucenieki"

Covid-19- related restrictions were introduced promptly at the asylum seekers' reception centre (hereafter – the Centre) during the initial stage of the pandemic. Interviews with asylum seekers were held online, facemasks were provided to the residents of the Centre, and their body temperature was regularly measured. Social workers and mentors from the Latvian Red Cross were rotating to ensure that not too many people from outside were present. At the same time, there were signals that no clear action plan had been prepared under the Ministry of the Interior regarding a potential outbreak of the infection, which was seen as a distinct possibility.

An outbreak did happen in March 2021, the second year of pandemic. Of 66 asylum seekers residing at the Centre at the time, 44 became infected with Covid-19.<sup>29</sup> Some were in critical condition though no deaths were registered. Quarantine measures were implemented. All the services were continued though, with most of them transposed online or delivered outdoors through the gates of the Centre.<sup>30</sup>

## Housing

The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted once again the long-standing problems with housing experienced by most BIPs. The pandemic conditions made the search for housing and entering into lease agreements even more challenging for BIPs. The responsibility to mind the imposed restrictions fell not only on the shoulders of beneficiaries but also on the NGOs that remained the main supporters of BIPs in their search for both temporary and permanent living space.

The housing challenge is perhaps best illustrated by the presence of several BIP families at the Centre even during the Covid-19 pandemic. Though these families had received the status

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<sup>29</sup> <https://www.delfi.lv/news/national/politics/patveruma-mekletaju-izmitinasanas-centra-mucenieki-registreti-44-covid-19-slimnieki.d?id=53166435>

<sup>30</sup> Another outbreak happened beyond the cut-off date of this evaluation, in August 2021, after the influx of asylum seekers across the Latvian-Belarusian border. Of 352 people placed at the Centre, 48 contracted Covid-19 (see <https://www.delfi.lv/news/national/politics/centra-mucenieki-kopuma-48-patveruma-mekletajiem-konstatets-covid-19.d?id=53517261>), and one person died. At the beginning of September 2021 a comprehensive quarantine was introduced at the Centre without properly informing its inhabitants, which sparked their protests.

of international protection and were supposed to have left the Centre and settled in their own flats, they had stayed on due to the difficulties in finding appropriate living space. The outbreak of Covid-19 in the Centre in March 2021 forced these families into quarantine, thus ceasing their integration process for a while. Some BIP families were staying at the Centre also during the major influx of asylum seekers in August 2021 when the Centre's capacity was exhausted and the building of the Ministry of Interior's Health and Sports Centre in the town of Jūrmala was used to host the newcomers, including some families and individuals with protection status. As noted above, prolonged stay of BIPs at the Centre is *de facto* illegal.

Challenges faced by BIPs in search for accommodation are well-known: discrimination in the rental market (property owners do not want to rent their properties to BIPs and are often reluctant to sign official lease agreements), as well as limited financial capacity to cover the rent, utilities, and especially the security deposit. One should also note the general context of relatively limited private rental segment in Latvia with high rental prices,<sup>31</sup> as well as systemic lack of social housing.<sup>32</sup>

While BIPs are entitled to housing support from municipalities, including the compensation of rental costs and utility payments, it is provided on the condition that the beneficiary has declared his/her place of residence in the respective municipality. Thus, BIPs are still subjected to the requirement to secure housing *before* applying for housing support, as noted already in the Baseline Report and the Evaluation 1 Report.

Despite a couple of recent legislative changes (see p.9., p.15 above) that cancelled the requirement for a registered place of residence as a precondition for receiving a one-off (crisis) allowance from municipality and stipulated that municipalities can provide housing assistance (living space, reconstruction assistance) to BIPs without a registered place of residence, social support remains largely tied to an officially declared residence in a particular municipality.

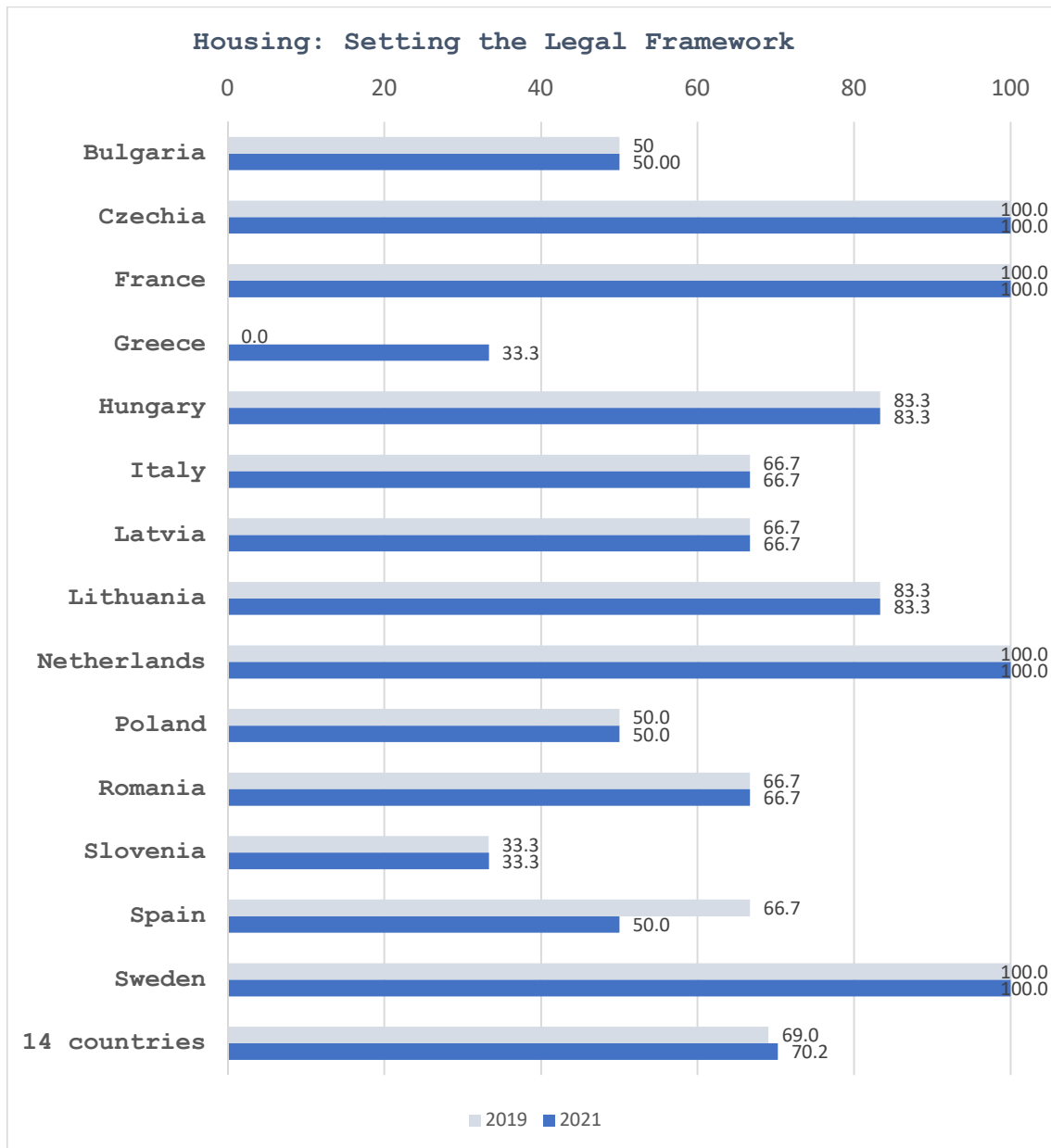
Moreover, BIPs have not been defined as a vulnerable group for mainstream housing benefits and have no other targeted housing

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<sup>31</sup>Fridenberga, A., Šuvajevs, A. (2021). [Pieejami īres mājokļi Latvijā - izaicinājumi un iespējas](#). Centre for Public Policy PROVIDUS.

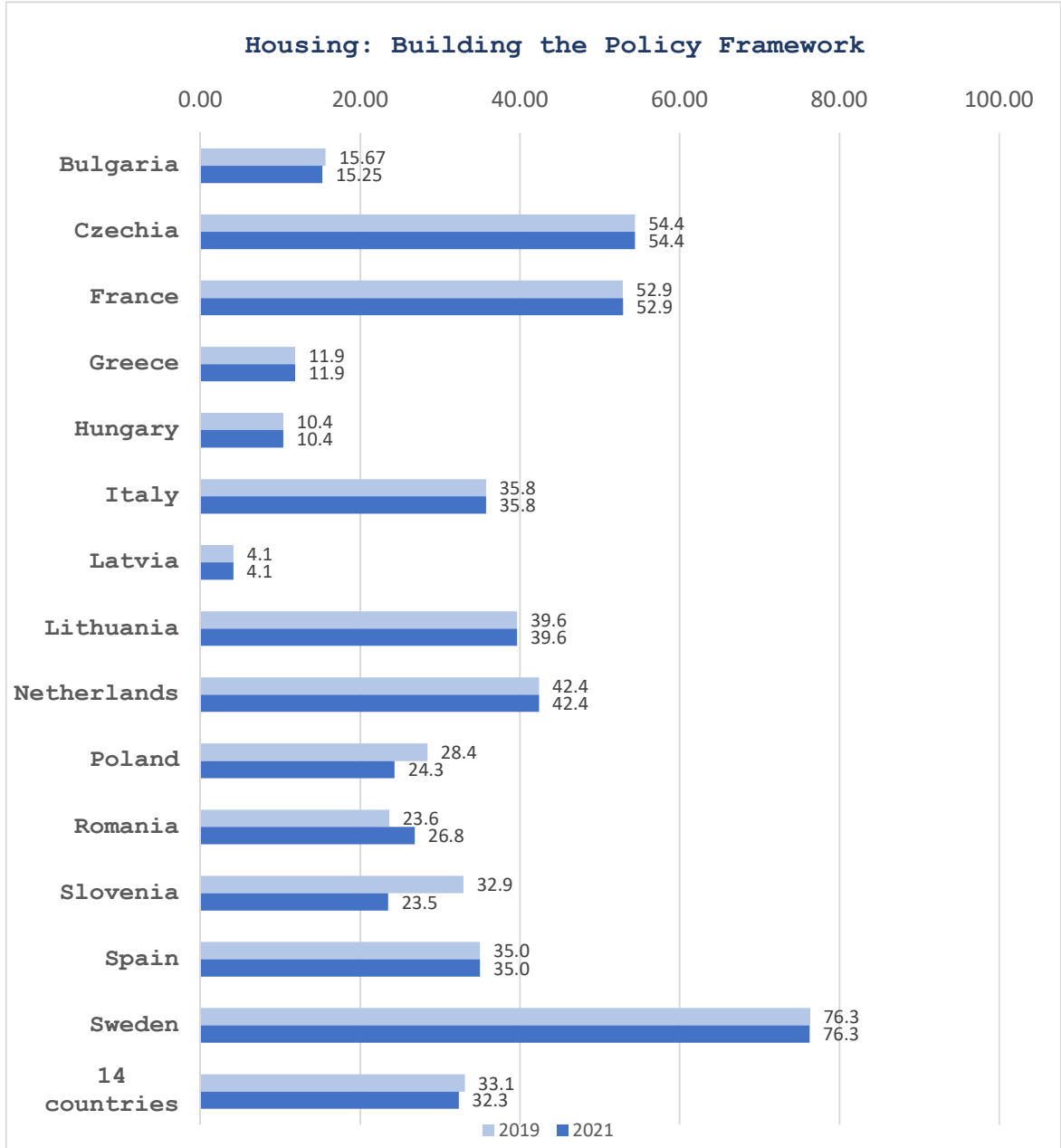
<sup>32</sup>Lāce, A., Šuvajevs, A. [Atzinums par mājokļu politiku starptautiskās saizsardzības saņēmējiem](#). Centre for Public Policy PROVIDUS.

assistance available to them. It is not clear whether the National Housing Strategy, currently under preparation, will include BIPs as a separate target group.



Comparative data: Migration Policy Group, Brussels. Data visualization: Institute of Public Affairs, Warsaw.

To summarise, there have been almost no changes in the legal and policy framework for housing provision since the previous evaluation period. As shown in the attached charts, while the legal framework leans towards being more favourable, the policy framework in Latvia is still the least favourable compared to other countries of the project.



Comparative data: Migration Policy Group, Brussels. Data visualization: Institute of Public Affairs, Warsaw.

## Social assistance

As indicated above, the Covid-19 pandemic underscored two main problems with regard to social support available to BIPs: 1) the conditionality of social support on an officially declared place

of residence, 2) the continuing inequality between recognised refugees and persons with subsidiary protection in terms of their eligibility to state social benefits. The latter problem was resolved after the cut-off date of this evaluation.

As the measures to mitigate the spread of Covid-19 were introduced, resulting in a transfer of many public and private services online and in a halt or reduction of numerous businesses, Latvian population were provided with several types of social benefits. The employees and self-employed whose work had stopped due to the Covid-19-related restrictions were entitled to idle time benefits from the State Revenue Service. In case of refusal of the Revenue Service to grant the benefits due to unmet eligibility criteria, employees and self-employed could apply for idle time support benefits from the State Social Insurance Agency.

Persons and families who received neither of the idle time benefits could turn to municipalities for the Covid-19 crisis benefits. The average amount of crisis benefits differed from one municipality to other, with average amount reaching 80 EUR per person. In addition, municipality would offer a 50 EUR benefit for each child under the age of 18. Yet these benefits were only available to people with a registered place of residence in the respective municipality. Thus, the BIP families who did not qualify for idle time benefits and had not managed to declare a place of residence within a municipality – even if for reasons beyond their influence – could not claim any additional support during the Covid-19 period. This disparity was however eliminated by the above-mentioned amendments to the Law on Social Services and Social Assistance, which made it possible to grant one-time crisis benefits to people residing in particular municipalities yet lacking officially declared places of residence in those municipalities. The amendments came into force in December 2020.<sup>33</sup> While the one-off allowance was untied from the requirement, other social support available to BIPs through municipalities remains conditioned on a registered place of residence. Lifting this precondition – and introducing instead a written agreement between the BIP and the municipality – would alleviate the difficulties of BIPs without an officially

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<sup>33</sup> [Grozījumi Sociālo pakalpojumu un sociālās palīdzības likumā.](#) *Latvijas Vēstnesis.* 11.12.2020.  
[Amendments to Law on Social Services and Social Assistance.](#) *Latvijas Vēstnesis.* 11.12.2020.

declared place of residence in accessing the much-needed social support.

The period of Covid-19 pandemic was likewise crucial in attracting attention once again to the inequality between the holders of refugee and subsidiary (alternative) status in terms of state social support available to them and, finally, eliminating this disparity.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the availability of state social benefits for BIPs was still linked to the type of residence permit, not the status of international protection. Thus, recognised refugees as holders of permanent residence permits were entitled to state social benefits, including the one-time "Covid benefits" of 500 EUR for each child and 200 EUR to pensioners and persons with disability and caretakers of children with disability. Beneficiaries of subsidiary protection as holders of temporary residence permits, however, were not entitled to any state social benefits (except maternity benefit), and thus could not receive the one-time "Covid allowances" either.

In March 2021, the Ombudsman of Latvia called on the government to address this disparity by providing all the BIPs equal access to state support during the Covid-19 pandemic through amendments to the law "On Countering the Consequences of the Spread of the Covid-19 Infection."<sup>34</sup> The letter was followed by a discussion of the issue at one of the meetings of the Cabinet of Ministers with participation of the Ombudsman and involved NGOs. In June 2021, the government took a decision to rectify the situation. Yet the necessary amendments were initiated only in November 2021, after several reminders from the Ombudsman. The changes were adopted by the Parliament in Dec 2021, beyond the time-period of this evaluation. BSPs started receiving backdated "Covid-19 benefits" already in December 2021.<sup>35</sup>

Importantly, similar far-reaching amendments were later made to the law "On State Social Benefits", making BSPs eligible to the same state social benefits as RRs. These amendments will come into force in July 2023.

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<sup>34</sup> Ombudsman. [Par atbalsta sniegšanu starptautisko aizsardzību saņēmušajām personu grupām](#). 11.03.2021.

<sup>35</sup> See <https://www.vsaa.gov.lv/en/article/one-time-aid-asylum-seekers-who-have-been-assigned-alternative-status-march-1-april-6>.

## Employment

Covid-19 crisis decreased the opportunities for BIPs to enter and successfully compete in the labour market. Several BIPs lost their jobs as their employers put their operations on halt or reduced the scope of production or services. The number of unemployed BIPs doubled, reaching 38 people in June 2021.<sup>36</sup>

With the Covid-related state support to employers gradually decreasing, labour vacancies were tightened, intensifying the competition among the labour force more generally. At the same time, seasonal employment opportunities increased for BIPs though historically there had been little interest in those among BIPs.

All assistance to BIPs by the SEA was transferred online during the Covid-19 pandemic, thus further complicating their entrance into the labour market. One of the biggest setbacks to unemployed BIPs was the interruption of the SEA-provided Latvian language courses for six months before resuming them in an online environment, which decreased their quality and exacerbated many of the problems associated with language learning. Furthermore, the National Centre for Education did not ensure the opportunity to take the language exam for several months after the introduction of Covid-19 mitigation measures. Thus it became very difficult for BIPs who had completed the language-learning courses before the lockdown to pass the exam after a long period of social seclusion with minimal or non-existent possibilities to practice the language.

## Education

Delivery of educational services to minors and adults who continued or had just begun their integration process was handicapped during the pandemic, particularly in the initial stage of Covid-related restrictions. Learning challenges were exacerbated by a general feeling of insecurity and seclusion among the refugee and BSP families, and vice versa.

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<sup>36</sup> [NIEM rīcības partneru tikšanās 2021. gada 18. jūnijā](#). Centre for Public Policy PROVIDUS.



Students attended school online, while not all of them had access to the necessary technological tools (computers, tablets). Some BSP families were assisted by NGOs who provided them with donated computers, while refugee families used their "Covid benefits" to acquire tools required for online education.

Insufficient knowledge of Latvian remained the main obstacle in the educational process. Possibilities of interaction with native Latvian speakers were very limited, and additional support from teachers' assistants in language learning was not always available to refugee and BSP children during the initial stage of pandemic. Minors and their parents increasingly relied on the help of social mentors. However, such assistance could neither be entirely meaningful, nor replace genuine teaching assistance as the learning process was time-consuming and mentors' ability to dedicate many hours to it was limited. Parents were also restricted in their ability to provide assistance due to the language difficulties, insufficient technological skills and lacking knowledge of the Latvian educational system. They also had the added challenge of maintaining the motivation of children in tense domestic conditions.

Amidst many problems, a state-funded project was implemented by the Latvian Red Cross in which a teacher worked with 17 children at both the asylum seekers' centre and outside the Centre to support their individual needs in the distant learning environment.<sup>37</sup> The project was evaluated as a success by all stakeholders, yet it did not become a permanent initiative.<sup>38</sup>

## Language and social learning

Some of the educational problems outlined above were observed also in the language and social orientation courses for adult BIPs. Firstly, the level of quality between in-person and distant learning was notable and affected the integration process accordingly. Secondly, not every person had sufficient

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<sup>37</sup> [Project "Safe living, safe learning" \(Droši būt, droši mācīties\)](#). Latvian Red Cross.

<sup>38</sup> A couple of other steps were undertaken towards the improvement of educational process of BIP minors after the end of evaluation period, such as making preparations for a permanent position of teacher's assistant at the asylum seekers' centre and creating a working group to find systemic solutions for qualitative education of minor asylum seekers in Latvia under the Ministry of Education.

technical means (access to computers, tablets) to ensure their connectivity to the respective courses, especially at the beginning of Covid-19 pandemic.

For the organisers of courses this presented a new challenge as they had to think about the provision of such needs. Also, managers of the courses were not always able to identify the participants online, which complicated the administration of these courses.

Combined with the long-standing issues of insufficient circulation of information on the possibilities to enrol in social orientation and languages courses among BIPs, the long queues for free-of-charge language courses, as well as the lack of flexible course formats and timetables to respond to specific needs of BIPs (e.g. employed or illiterate persons), Covid-related restrictions produced additional strain on newcomers.

## Building bridges: integration as a two-way process

The one-to-one mentorship programme was further affirmed as a remarkable success in the integration system during the Covid-19 pandemic as social mentors were creative and inventive in their ways of providing assistance, often going beyond their stipulated responsibilities to ensure that BIP needs were met.

NGOs "I Want to Help Refugees", "Shelter 'Safe House'", "MakeRoom" provided additional much-needed support, including supplementary mentorship and volunteer assistance, and opportunities for some, however slight, socialisation during the Covid-19 period.

Nevertheless, the already minimal chances for engaging with the local society (and vice versa) were further reduced as Covid-19 related restrictions were kept in place for a very long time. The increased perception of vulnerability and isolation as experienced by BIPs was broadly remarked upon and concerned all dimensions of integration. Psycho-emotional well-being of BIPs was at an increased risk coupled with anxieties about their children's education and general inclusion (or lack thereof) in society.

As was noted already in the Baseline Report and Evaluation 1 Report, the mentor's service should become a permanent form of support available to BIPs also after 12 months since receiving the status of international protection. Experience of NGOs working with BIPs shows that mentors' support would be a valuable asset not only for BIPs who return to Latvia after secondary movement, but also for those who have received this support for 12 months yet need more assistance in further integration. The need for additional support should be assessed by social worker.

Importantly, the recent arrival of more than 20 thousand Ukrainian war escapees into Latvia makes ever more timely the recommendation offered in the Evaluation 1 Report to transfer the mentorship services to municipalities. This would require increasing the municipal resources for social work and training social workers in providing assistance to newcomers. Such a move would result in mainstreaming the BIP integration support on a municipal level and thus not only ensure efficient assistance to thousands of Ukrainian beneficiaries of temporary protection, but also improve access to various modes of assistance to all BIPs in Latvia.

## Conclusion

In the years 2019-2021, BIP integration system experienced little change with regard to legal and policy framework and collaborative implementation of integration measures. Two largely unexpected upheavals - the Covid-19 pandemic and the influx of irregular migrants into Latvia through Belarus - highlighted once again the long-standing challenges of the integration system, namely:

- Lack of coordination and mainstreaming of integration policies;
- lack of permanent, long-term social assistance model for BIPs;
- inequality of support between the two different categories of BIPs defined by residence status;
- absence of housing support.

Yet some of the long-discussed and much needed legislative and policy changes took place after the period of current evaluation. These developments included:

- Creation of a national coordinating body for socio-economic inclusion of BIPs;
- elimination of differences between social support based on the protection status;
- steps towards the untying of social support from the registered place of residence as a precondition for receiving social assistance.

Despite the positive changes, most of the recommendations for improving the integration system that were included in NIEM's Baseline Report and in the 1st Evaluation Report are still valid. The recommendations summarised below call for solutions to the long-standing integration challenges in Latvia during the last six years. Notably, the need for an efficient integration system has become particularly acute with the arrival of Ukrainian war refugees in recent months. Therefore, these recommendations are also relevant for the reception and integration of Ukrainian civilians in Latvia:

- Improve the mainstreaming of integration activities across the relevant policy fields and different sectors of government and enhance the coordination of integration activities with the help of the new national coordinating institution (SIF).
- Cancel the requirement for a registered place of residence as a precondition for all types of social support. Consider registering social support provided to SAS in a special database the same way as it is currently done for Ukrainian civilians to prevent requests for assistance in several municipalities.
- Develop targeted housing support to BIPs by recognising them as one of the target groups in the National Housing Strategy, possibly introducing a specific initial housing benefit to BIPs, setting up a state/municipal guarantee fund for property-owners renting out their properties to BIPs, developing social housing and intermediate solutions

such as halfway homes for BIPs through cooperation of state and municipal institutions and NGOs.

- Transfer the social mentorship service offered to BIPs to municipalities so as to mainstream the integration support at the municipal level. This move would require increased resources for social work at the municipalities and additional state-sponsored training of municipal social workers and mentors.
  
- Extend the duration of social mentor's service from 12 months to 24 months, making the provision of mentor's support in the latter 12 months subject to an assessment by social worker.

National Integration Evaluation  
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[www.forintegration.eu](http://www.forintegration.eu)

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