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Integration in Lithuania

WE NEED A STRONG AND EFFICIENT ASSIMILATION

The mass media reproduce too many stereotypes and historical sensitivities, says Rūta Dapkūnaitė. The language used has a negative effect on Lithuanians. Instead, media coverage must be comprehensive in order to welcome immigrants.

*The interview was conducted by Dirk Bornschein**

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Bornschein: Are there social conflicts concerning immigration in your country, Lithuania? And if so, where do they lie?

Dapkūnaitė: People in Lithuania are worried. On one side they want refugees to respect the culture, to speak the Lithuanian language and to work and pay taxes, but then same people are afraid of losing their own jobs. They feel threatened. It is often said that the refugees spend money that is actually intended for Lithuanians...

... Lithuania is a social welfare state?

Dapkūnaitė: Maybe not yet, but it's on the way to be... There are so many stereotypes.

Dapkūnaitė: The media presents a certain point of view. And then people, even if they don't know the exact situation, will believe what they read and they will remember these stereotypes and see them as true and fact. But it is important to mention that we have had several crises, the Syrian crisis, then came the crisis on the Belarusian border, the war in Ukraine. You can see that people reacted differently to different groups of refugees or immigrants. For example, when the Syrian crisis started and Lithuania was supposed to take in about 1,100 refugees, there was a big discussion: Oh my God, 1,000, how bad is that? People felt threatened, that kind of narrative. But when the war in Ukraine started, about 80,000 people came to Lithuania and actually it was not a problem to take them in, to welcome them or to integrate them.

Even stereotypes sometimes have a real background, sometimes not. So according to you, are the concerns of these people partly justified or totally unfounded?

Dapkūnaitė: But it is important to mention that we have had several crises, the Syrian crisis, then came the crisis on the Belarusian border, the war in Ukraine. You can see that people reacted differently to different groups of refugees or immigrants. For example, when the Syrian crisis started and Lithuania was supposed to take in about 1,100 refugees, there was a big discussion: Oh my God, 1,000, how bad is that? People felt threatened, that kind of narrative. But when the war in Ukraine started, about 80,000 people came to Lithuania and actually it was not a problem to take them in, to welcome them or to integrate them.

Even stereotypes sometimes have a real background, sometimes not. So according to you, are the concerns of these people partly justified or totally unfounded?

Dapkūnaitė: I would say that we shouldn't worry about that because the number of immigrants in Lithuania is very low. We need a strong and efficient integration system. Although, I would prefer the word assimilation. It is stronger. It emphasises that Lithuanians also have to make an effort to be welcoming. I once interviewed a Lithuanian woman who worked in the cosmetics industry. She was very upset that an immigrant was offering the same services at a lower price and now her clients stayed with him instead of her. Of course, these normal people can then see immigrants as a threat. On the other hand, I see that we are shrinking as a population and many don't want to work. All the food delivery drivers are migrants. Lithuanians simply don't want to work.

We started to talk about the reasons for the current discussions. Do you see deep roots in your country's mentality in terms of immigration, collective trauma, belief systems and so on?

Dapkūnaitė: Yeah, of course, our collective memory is based on our history, especially with the Soviet Union. The same dynamic repeats itself, the Russians came and destroyed, the Germans did the same. And today too, the migrants are coming and will destroy something. Of course, you can see this attitude particularly among older people. People feel threatened by other cultures, even though they don't even know them.

How successful were the public measures to integrate migrants or assimilate migrants?

Dapkūnaitė: Oh, well. I wouldn't say that it's very successful, but the authorities believe it is. The government authorities leave this issue to the NGOs, which in turn are controlled by the state. If you talk to migrants, you get the impression that there are a lot of problems:

First of all, the issue of learning the language is not adequately addressed. People here speak Lithuanian, others speak Russian or English and then suddenly people come who don't speak any of these languages, and our language is not easy.

But there are other issues, like housing, for example. I don't know what the real problems are, maybe this is just part of the stereotypes. But the local population does not want to rent to immigrants. On the other hand, a lot is being done for Ukrainians.

Can you see different views within the political sphere on how to deal with immigrants?

Dapkūnaitė: When the crisis began in Belarus, they built a fence to protect the country from migrants. But this gave people a reason to believe that migrants are some kind of threat. Politicians talk about 'we have to protect Lithuania' and 'people shouldn't come here'. It's not easy for the Ukrainians here, but the asylum seekers stayed in the integration centres at the border for a long time. Now they have some kind of identity card or residence permit, but not all companies believe it is genuine and they cannot find work. For example, they can't get bank accounts and so on.

And then we started receiving more and more people from the Belarussian opposition. This whole situation is also seen as a threat. But the asylum seekers, they lose.

How do the mass media behave in this situation?

Dapkūnaitė: They paint a very negative picture of the crises and immigration. People are called illegal, and we know that there is no such thing as an illegal person. This word, illegal, has a negative meaning, they threaten us, they can be terrorists. And the media shows what is happening in Germany and Sweden, for example, that Christmas trees are not allowed to be put up there because of the Islamic population. When people hear that, another stereotype immediately comes to mind, namely that they want to destroy our culture.

The media is a kind of mirror; it reflects the political discourse. They probably say what the politicians want them to say. Of course, it's not just the media that shapes these attitudes. There is also the history of the country. For a long time, Lithuania was a country of emigration, people left. I was once in a discussion with politicians who were upset about immigration and said that Lithuanians should come back, that was the solution. This example shows how unwelcome immigrants are.

Which foreign countries receive the most media coverage in Lithuania, especially in the field of immigration?

Dapkūnaitė: Yes, that's the problem when you don't give a comprehensive picture of what's actually happening, who's coming, why they're coming and so on. The journalistic problem in Lithuania is quite profound. They only present narrow views. For example, you can read about the terror attack in Paris. But I would like them to talk about the integration system itself. They need to provide real coverage highlighting also the benefits of migration and the challenges, but they only focus on negative events in Europe, in Germany, in Sweden, and so on.

Is there a difference on how academia is dealing with the immigration issue and which one?

Dapkūnaitė: There is work being done to promote integration in the country. How to make it easier for people to integrate. Unfortunately, they don't have much influence in the mass media, which reflect much more the political debate. And academia is focused on quantitative research, we don't have many researchers in this field. But let's not forget that we didn't have many migrants before, only now they are starting to work on this issue. There are some who focus on what happened to the migrants.

In other countries, the challenges of the integration process are associated with racist attitudes of parts of the host population.

Dapkūnaitė: Yes, some others raise the question of how Lithuanians perceive immigrants and that this should actually be seen as racism. But this is not a heated topic. We must not forget that we are a small country with a consequently smaller academic sector.

How do the important political forces in your country see the Common European Asylum System?

Dapkūnaitė: In general, they would prefer not to welcome asylum seekers. But even if Lithuania wouldn't agree to the Common European Asylum System, it wouldn't change anything.

One of the biggest challenges for the European party systems in recent years has been the rise of the so-called right-wing populist parties. Do you recognise anything similar in your country?

Dapkūnaitė: Yeah, this happened in Lithuania as well. There is a farmers' union that criticises the political class and migration is a topic as well. But they are not strictly right-wing. And although immigration is one of their main topics, so is Russia.

According to you, how should your country deal with migration, and why should they do that?

Dapkūnaitė: It's important that human rights are being respected. I accept that under these political conditions: We should have some border control to prevent illegal crossings. But it has to be done in a humane way. We need to have an exchange with other European countries or the EU, about how to handle the crisis, good practices, and so on.

Dapkūnaitė: Nevertheless, there should also be a strict and strong immigration system. And the media coverage must be comprehensive, in order to welcome these people. We also have to be prepared to receive and integrate the migrants. That would be perfect. If you want and with political will, there is no problem finding housing and jobs. The Ukrainian war has shown us, it is possible.

Do you see the need for a dialog and what should be the goal of this process?

Dapkūnaitė: There is a great need for dialogue, communication and cooperation, not only between the institutions in each country, but of course also within the European Union, in order to manage immigration well.

Dapkūnaitė: They have to find a common ground, for example the NGOs that work directly with refugees, they have to talk to the governmental institutions, or the refugees to the local population, they all have to be involved in this dialogue. People have different views and perspectives, but we have to come up with facts to find appropriate solutions. We have to listen to each other, but at the end of the day we have to find solutions.

Rūta Dapkūnaitė, we had lots of technical problems while we were talking. Even more I thank you for your patience and collaboration.

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