

INSTITUTE OF BALTIC STUDIES

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POLICY BRIEF: CHALLENGES TO NEW MIGRANT INTEGRATION IN ESTONIA

An Analysis of the Optional Written
Comments Section of the 2020
Estonian Integration Monitoring Survey

EIM 2020

PREPARED AND PRESENTED BY

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I. INTRODUCTION

This policy brief analyses the written feedback left by 1166 newly-arrived immigrants in the 2020 Estonian Integration Monitoring survey (EIM 2020).

Based on data gathered between October 2020 and January 2021, this brief gives further insight into the everyday experiences of new migrants living in Estonia. For an overview of the main EIM 2020 results, please see the chapter on new migrants in the main report [here](#).

In their written comments, new migrants in Estonia highlighted eight major concerns related to Estonia:

1. The demand for state-organised Estonian language courses currently outweighs the supply. As a result, many new migrants struggle to receive the necessary language support;
2. Migrants often struggle to receive Estonian public services in English; some less commonly-used official documents are not translated into English at all;
3. More street signs, public transport information, product labels, and warnings should be translated into English;
4. There is a shortage of healthcare professionals who speak sufficient English. Finding and registering with an English-speaking family doctor is difficult;
5. Migrants who hold temporary residency permits report that banks reject their otherwise suitable mortgage applications or offer unfavourable loan conditions;
6. Migrants face difficulties finding information scattered amongst multiple ministry websites. Some feel the need for direct, personalised communication by migration services via email or phone;
7. Several respondents who wish to apply for an Estonian passport are precluded from doing so by their country's policy against citizenship renunciations;
8. There is a demand for more social integration events with native residents to help migrants establish connections with Estonians.

Main migrant concerns:

1. too few language course sign-up slots
2. government services often not available in English
3. lack of English transitions (maps, signs, warnings)
4. hard to register with family doctors, not enough English-speaking doctors
5. Likely to face rejection when applying for mortgages
6. government information is hard to find
7. naturalisation is impossible for the respondents who can not legally renounce their first citizenship
8. lack of social integration programmes with locals

II. METHODOLOGY

The 2020 EIM survey among new migrants mapped the adaptation processes amongst permanent residents, immigrants and returnees, aged 15 to 85, who have settled in Estonia within the last ten years. As a part of Estonia's effort to build social cohesion, the study's overarching goal was to inform integration policy.

In addition to quantitative survey data, the survey also collected 1166 optional text comments from the respondents. For this policy brief, these comments were coded and analysed according to their sentiment and theme. The respondents who left these comments were predominantly urban residents from either Tallinn (72%) or Tartu (10%). The majority have arrived within the past five years (82%). Finally, the three most represented origin countries were Russia (18%), Ukraine (12%), Finland (6%).

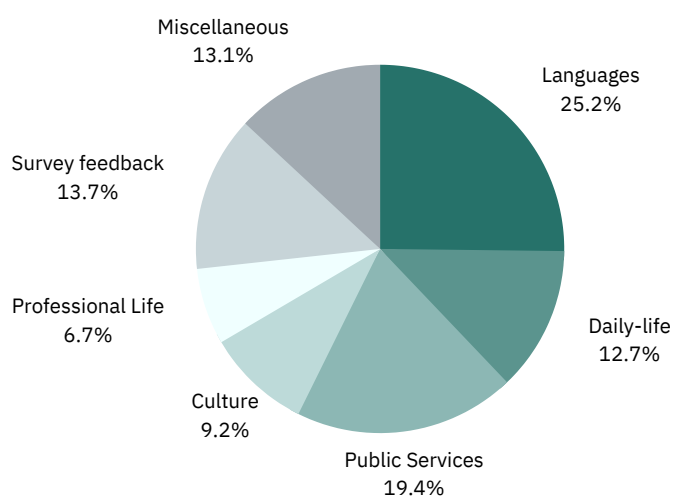
Please get in touch with the brief author at darya.podgoretskaya@ibs.ee to request more details or access the complete dataset.

- 1166 respondents
- aged 15 to 85.
- Settled in Estonia within the past 10 years
- Mostly urban residents from Tallinn and Tartu
- Main origin countries: Russia (18%), Ukraine (12%), Finland (6%).

III. FINDINGS

A total of 46 themes emerged from the 1166 text comments analysed for the brief. The most common concerns can, however, be separated into three broad categories: language (25%), daily-life (13%), and public services (19%):

The main thematic categories were language (25%), daily-life (13%), public services (19%)



The brief looks into each of these broad categories and outlines prominent issues and sub-themes within them.

Learning Estonian

While the overall results of the EIM 2020 survey point to an increase in the general Estonian-language proficiency amongst migrants within the past decade, only 52% of the main survey respondents were satisfied with course accessibility.

Comprising 14% of the data sample, the topic of Estonian language learning was also prominent in the text comment section. The sentiment regarding Estonian courses was largely negative, with 93% of the respondents being critical of the current language course provisions. The main negative opinions included:

1. Course demand outweighs the supply (29 comments): One respondent writes, “*it feels like as soon as they [language courses] are made available, they run out of space.*”

2. Lack of information (58 comments): Although the Estonian government provides free language courses at multiple difficulty levels, 29 respondents were unaware of free A1 course options, while another 18 respondents did not know about free advanced course options. Moreover, 11 comments criticised the lack of information on language-learning opportunities.

3. Course quality and accessibility (40 respondents): a total of 18 respondents criticised language teaching quality. While some of these comments were vague, others criticised the “*traditional learning model*” and “*outdated*” teaching methods.

In addition, 16 comments said that the course schedule is not flexible enough, especially for those working night shifts.

Another six respondents said that it is hard to physically attend classes for those living in the countryside.

Language learning also featured as one of the major topics in the 2017 EIM survey comments dataset. Notably, the 2017 comments similarly highlighted the lack of free courses as a prominent issue.

Free Estonian courses are often oversubscribed making it difficult for foreigners to sign up

Some respondents were uninformed about the government-organised language courses

Government-run language courses use outdated teaching methods. Their rigid schedule does not accommodate all migrants. Those living in the countryside struggle to physically attend courses

English Language Use

Comments about the use of English in Estonia made up 9% of the total data sample. Some key takeaways include:

1. Lack of English-language government services (33 comments): reportedly, a high number of officials do not speak English well enough or intentionally refuse to use the language. Furthermore, one respondent said, *“the basic documents were available in English, but as soon it was a bit more specific only in Estonian or Russian anymore.”*

With the overall EIM2020 survey report indicating that 31% of respondents can not find services in their preferred language, the issue appears to be prominent.

2. English sign translations (32 comments): some maps, bus schedules, street signs, and warnings are not translated into English, bringing additional complications into foreigners’ daily lives. Notably, 84% of these comments came from Tallinn residents.

Language learning also featured as one of the major topics in the 2017 EIM survey comments dataset. Notably, the 2017 comments similarly highlighted the lack of free courses as a prominent issue.

Daily Life

The daily life theme comprised 15% of all comments and included various sub-themes ranging from sports access to safety. The two main issues that stood out the most were medicine and housing:

1. Medicine (84 comments): The lack of English-speaking professionals (theme featured in 31 comments) was a notable concern amongst the respondents. One respondent said that *“having a friend as a real-time translator with the emergency service”* is the only way to receive high-quality medical services.

Moreover, migrants find the process of registering with family doctors (featured in 28 comments) especially troublesome due to the lack of information and a shortage of English-speaking professionals. Reportedly, family doctors reject English-language speaking patients passing them onto their colleagues. One respondent writes: *“ I gave up after three years and just visit the ER or go to a private doctor. I must have reached out to 6 different clinics, and they all seemed too eager to pass the buck to someone else.”*

Some government officials do not speak sufficient English. Less used documents are not translated into English

Respondents would like to see more English-language translations of public signs

English-speaking medical professionals are hard to find. Family doctors reportedly reject English-speaking patients passing them on to other colleagues

2. Housing (48 comments): The two main issues related to housing were high housing prices and the difficulties applying for the mortgages. Although most banks do not openly debar foreigners from seeking loans, survey respondents report unfair treatment. As one respondent said, *“the terms [for migrants] in many cases are not equal, sometimes could be even considered as discriminating.”* Another respondent said that *“banks try to make any possible excuse to reject their [migrant’s] application.”* A total of 25 respondents complained about difficulties seeking mortgages.

Banks reject foreigners' mortgage applications or set disadvantageous conditions for otherwise well-suited applicants

Public Services

The final category encompasses various comments related to government services, migration policy, laws and bureaucracy. With a total of 265 comments (19%), the government category saw three significant clusters of concerns:

1. Lack of clear information (50 comments): respondents cited the existence of multiple distinct ministry websites as a source of confusion. As one comment says, *“everything is available; it’s just not always easy to find; a central hub for information would be great.”*

50 respondents (5%) criticised lack of information about public services. Information is spread out through various government websites

Additionally, nine respondents suggested an onboarding pack with information on various aspects of life in Estonia. While such manuals do exist (e.g. [Settle In Estonia](#)), it appears that some new migrants living in Estonia are not aware of these resources. Some suggested that the government should send out information directly via email to minimise confusion.

With 54% of the overall EIM 2020 survey respondents rating government information access as “bad” (see more in the [full report](#)), the issue likely stems from difficulties navigating government websites and lack of direct communication from the migration services.

2. Dual citizenship (28 comments): respondents highlighted that certain countries (e.g. Iran) provide no legal pathways to renouncing citizenship. Given that Estonia forbids dual nationality, citizens of these countries are unable to apply for a passport.

Estonia's law against holding dual citizenship disadvantages migrants who can not legally renounce their original passport

Notably, 34% of the overall EIM 2020 survey respondents who do not plan to apply for naturalisation cited having another citizenship as the reason. As the text comments suggest, this group may be unable, rather than unwilling, to give their current citizenship up.

3. Social Integration Opportunities (42 comments): around 16% of the comments suggested organising more social integration events with the Estonian locals. Notably, the need for more social integration opportunities was also among the most prominent themes in the 2017 EIM survey results - respondents similarly said that it is challenging to make Estonian friends.

This finding corresponds to the general trend observed in the main EIM 2020 report: with only 44% of respondents interacting with Estonians (and mostly only at work or school), the lack of such integration events is apparent.

Respondents wish to see more social integration opportunities with locals

IV. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Increasing Estonian-language course capacity and spreading awareness of study opportunities

- **Proposed measures:** While it may be a challenging task with regards to finance and logistics, the number of sign-up slots for language courses should be expanded.
- **Intended outcome:** With many respondents finding it hard to sign up for free language courses, increasing the supply of course slots would enable more migrants to learn Estonian..

The government should aim to increase the number of sign-up slots for ELL courses

2. Creating a database of English-speaking healthcare professionals

- **Proposed measures:** Estonian Health Board's registry should list doctors' fluency in Russian and English to assist foreigners in choosing an appropriate specialist. In the long run, more resources should be invested to improve language skills amongst healthcare professionals.
- **Intended outcome:** the database will enable new migrants to register with the right family doctor without being passed on to other specialists. While this measure may lead to an over-allocation of patients to English-speaking doctors, the government can counter this problem in the long run by providing better English-language training.
- **International examples:** A private [website from Berlin](#) provides a list of English-speaking family doctors in the city or [Doctolib](#) which allows users to filter doctors by several criteria, including language fluency.

Estonia's Health Board should list doctors' language proficiency

3. Introducing direct government communication channels and centralising the access to information

- **Proposed measures:** Settle in Estonia could share the guides with new migrants directly via email. Many respondents have also suggested giving out booklets with relevant information to foreigners as they collect their residency cards.
- **Intended outcome:** While all the relevant resources and guides already exist, their distribution could be improved. This may, in turn, reduce the relatively high number of foreigners who report lacking information about public services and policies.

Mortgage guarantor schemes could provide a solution to mortgage providers' hesitation in issuing loans to foreigners

4. Supporting integration programmes that promote contacts between foreigners and locals

- **Proposed measures:** local governments should consider various integration measures ranging from buddy-up programmes where locals are paired up with migrant families to regular interest activities such as reading groups etc.
- **Intended outcome:** such programmes can increase the currently low number of migrants who regularly interact with Estonians, thus improving social cohesion.
- **International examples:** Germany pioneered [a buddy-up system](#) where refugees were paired with local volunteers in 2016: the programme saw a number of successes in building up refugees' confidence.

Sending information to expats directly via email may reduce confusion over government services and policies. One central government website directory may also be useful.

5. Investigating mortgage conditions for foreigners, implementing a guarantor scheme

- **Proposed measures:** nationals of countries that do not allow citizenship renunciations (e.g. Greece and Iran) should be allowed to apply for naturalisation as an exception to the law.
- **Intended outcome:** the current citizenship system discriminates against certain foreigners who may wish to acquire Estonian citizenship and become fully naturalised but can not legally do so.
- **International examples:** Denmark grants a number of exceptions to its naturalisation requirements. Citizens who are legally unable to give up their first nationality can nevertheless receive a dutch passport if they fit the rest of the naturalisation requirements.

Estonia should consider introducing exceptions to its naturalisation laws on a case-by-case basis.

6. Introducing exceptions to the single citizenship requirement on a case-by-case basis

- **Proposed measures:** nationals of countries that do not allow citizenship renunciations (e.g. Iran) should be allowed to apply for naturalisation as an exception to the law.
- **Intended outcome:** the current system disadvantages foreigners from a number of countries that do not provide legal pathways for citizenship renunciations. These migrants may wish to acquire Estonian citizenship, but can not legally do so.
- **International examples:** Denmark grants several exceptions to its naturalisation requirements: citizens who are legally unable to give up their first nationality can nevertheless receive a Dutch passport if they fit the rest of the naturalisation requirements.

Buddy-up programmes or regular social events will help foreigners build their networks and meet local residents.

V. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Based on 1166 text comments gathered as a part of the 2020 Estonian Integration Monitoring survey (EIM 2020), this supplementary policy brief covers several issues new migrants face in Estonia.

The key problems highlighted in the written comments section include dissatisfaction with language course accessibility, lack of English-language public and medical services, and difficulties finding official information and integration manuals. Other major concerns include issues applying for a mortgage as a foreigner, a need for more social integration events, and criticisms of the anti-dual citizenship laws.

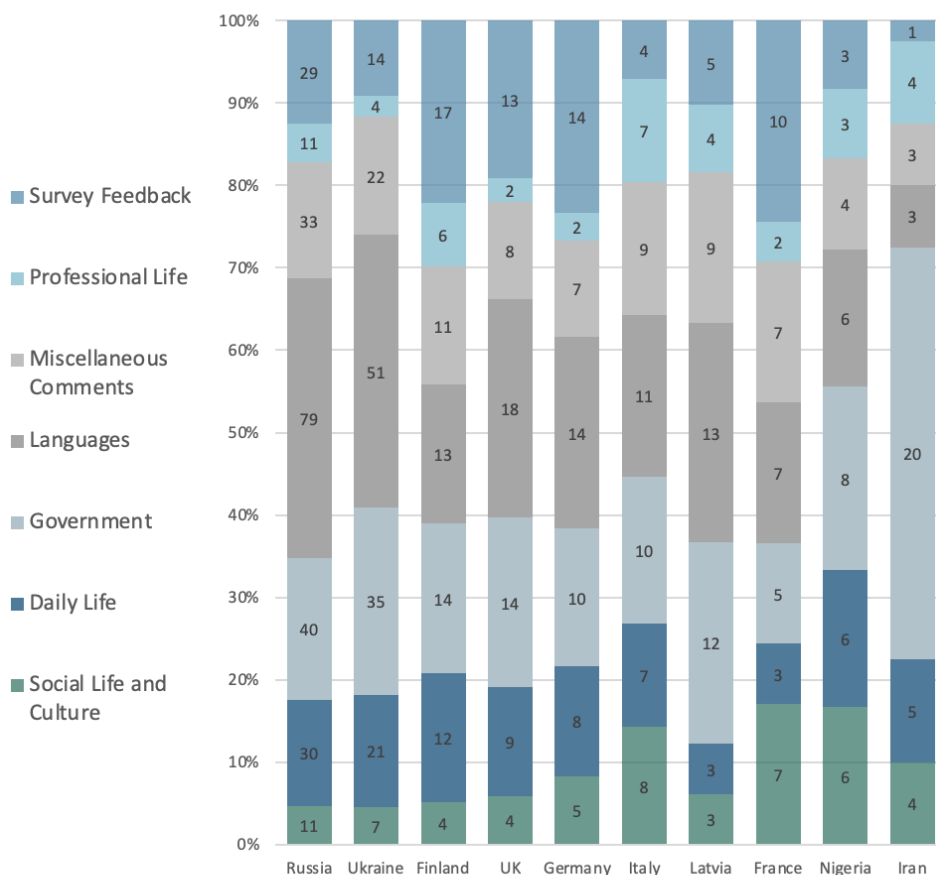
The policy-recommendation section provides six possible solutions to these issues. These include increasing the number of language course slots, creating a centralised database of family doctors' language proficiency, distributing integration guides directly via email, and establishing local social integration programmes. The government should also consider investigating unfair mortgage conditions for foreigners and introducing exceptions to its naturalisation policy to further improve migrant integration.

VI. APPENDIX: ORIGIN COUNTRIES

The sample of comments analysed in this brief came from citizens of 85 countries. As anticipated, there was some variation in the themes covered by these different nationals. While it should be noted that the number of comments from each country may be too small to reveal definitive patterns, it is nevertheless possible to make some preliminary observations:

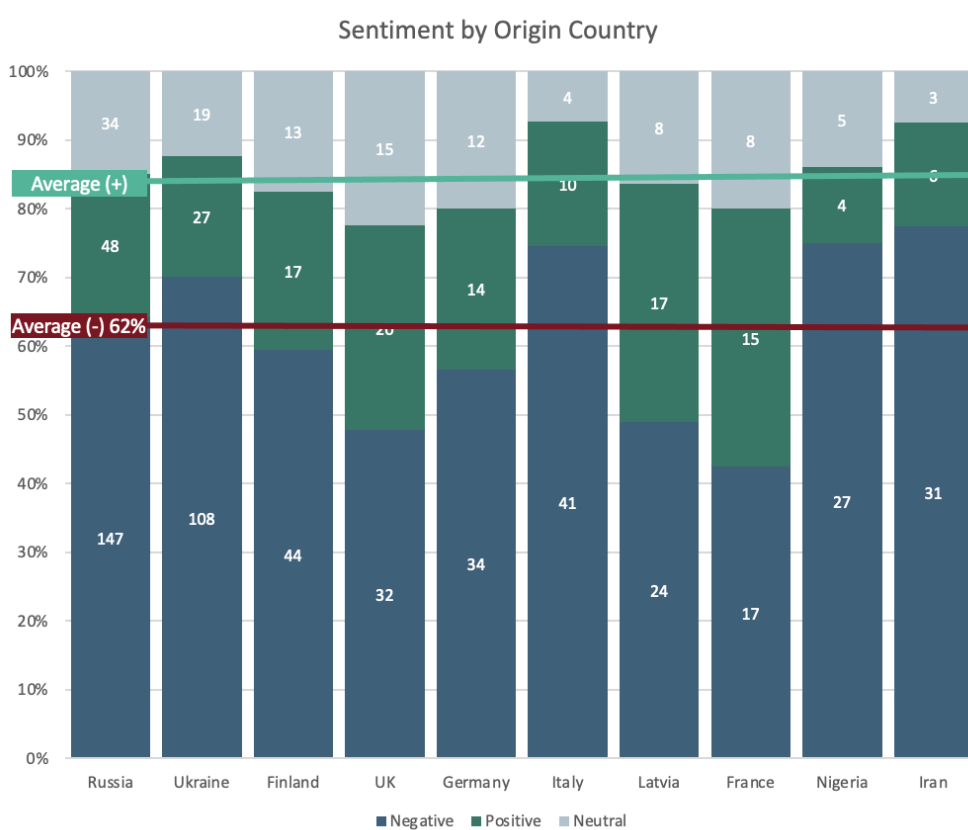
1. Russian and Ukrainian citizens were 12% more concerned with language issues and, in particular, Estonian language learning than the average of the ten groups;
2. Nigerian and French citizens were 10% more likely to mention cultural and social aspects of life in Estonia than other nationalities. In particular, Nigerian citizens reported more incidents of racism than any other group;
3. Iranian nationals had the highest ratio of government comments compared to other groups. The majority of these comments stemmed from concerns over laws forbidding dual citizenship.

Thematic Preference by Origin Country



Sentiment analysis similarly reveals subtle differences between nationalities. Citizens of France and Latvia, for example, had the highest proportion of positive comments. The majority of these positive comments were vague statements praising Estonia as “a wonderful country to live and work in” or thanking the survey’s authors.

On the other hand, Italian, Nigerian and Iranian nationals had the highest proportion of negative comments. The major concerns flagged by these groups were lack of English-language public and medical services (Italy), incidents of racial discrimination (Nigeria), and anti-dual citizenship requirements (Iran).



The influence of the origin country on migrant’s experience in Estonia is an area that merits further investigation. As preliminary findings suggest, nationality may considerably impact migrants’ concerns and overall experience in Estonia.

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