

Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on 'the new European Agenda for Integration'

(2012/C 113/04)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

- notes that full involvement of migrants in the economic, social and political life of their host cities and regions is essential to realising the Europe 2020 strategy objectives of economic, social and territorial cohesion;
- believes multilevel governance to be the most appropriate method for achieving optimum integration of migrants;
- commends the European Commission's position that integration policies must be developed at local level on a bottom-up basis;
- believes that territorial pacts provide a flexible framework for putting integration policies into effect because they permit implementation of measures and thematic priorities that are appropriate for each territorial unit and because they can reflect the division of powers between different levels of government, and the subsidiarity and proportionality principles;
- welcomes the European Commission's initiative on introducing European Integration Modules;
- considers it useful to form a strategic partnership between the CoR and the European Commission and European networks of cities and regions;
- this partnership could be created by setting up a network of local and regional authorities for integration, in which policy-making bodies from all levels of government, as well as civil society organisations, could take part. The CoR looks forward to the political, economic and operational support of the European Commission in fully implementing the strategic partnership it could be incorporated into the framework of existing mechanisms and initiatives.

Rapporteur	Dimitrios KALOGEROPOULOS (EL/EPP), Municipal Councillor of Aegaleo
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I. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

Frame of reference

1. observes that immigration is currently a reality for all EU Member States and is especially topical following the Arab spring, which produced new population movements towards Europe;

2. notes that the increase in migrant numbers over the past decade has been accompanied by major changes in the categories of migrants, and in the pattern and form of migration flows;

3. points out that migrant integration strategies are bound up with European migration policy, which will only be effective if it is coherent and accompanied by support for development initiatives in migrants' countries of origin and transit;

4. believes that the surge in migration creates an urgent need to implement effective policies for the social, economic and cultural integration of legal migrants from third countries;

5. recalls that integration of migrants is primarily the responsibility of the Member States. National, regional and local authorities are responsible for implementing integration policies in areas such as education, health, housing and the labour market. Although the Lisbon Treaty is intended to strengthen the role of the European Union in policy relating to integration of third-country nationals, it does not seek to harmonise the legislative or regulatory provisions of the Member States;

6. notes that both the eleven Common Basic Principles adopted by the Council in 2004 and the Common Agenda for Integration published by the European Commission in 2005 define the integration of third-country nationals as a "dynamic, two-way process of mutual accommodation by all immigrants and residents of Member States";

7. notes that the third European ministerial conference on integration, held in Vichy in November 2008, highlighted the need to involve local and regional authorities in planning, implementing and evaluating integration policies while also underscoring the essential role they play in helping migrants assimilate into local communities;

8. notes that in the conclusions of the European ministerial conference on integration held in Zaragoza, Spain, in April 2010, emphasis was placed on the need to highlight the positive effects of immigration at European level and to view integration and cultural diversity as drivers of development and social cohesion;

9. observes that in recent years the EU has created a whole range of useful tools that enable the Member States to shape their integration policies better and implement effective measures. The European Fund for the Integration of Third-Country Nationals was set up, as well as the European Integration Forum, which meets regularly to enable representatives of civil society and immigrants' organisations to engage in political dialogue. In addition, a European immigration portal has been set up with a large amount of information on integration, and three handbooks have been written containing useful examples of best practice;

10. believes that its own stakeholder consultation was valuable and is pleased that its findings and proposals were taken on board by the European Commission when drawing up the new European Agenda ⁽¹⁾;

11. observes that in its new European Agenda for Integration of Third-Country Nationals the European Commission views integration as an ongoing process that is the shared responsibility of different levels of government and that calls for sustained efforts and constant cooperation between stakeholders;

12. observes that the present opinion uses the framework provided by the CoR's own-initiative opinion on *Local and regional authorities at the forefront of integration policies* and is intended to present the CoR's response to future challenges, demonstrating the contribution made by local and regional authorities to framing and implementing policy on the integration of legal third-country migrants. It will also give the CoR's view on how a strategic partnership with the European Commission should be developed;

Basic principles

13. believes that integration should be seen as the outcome of a process allowing third-country nationals to function without outside help and hold a position in society equal to that of nationals and European citizens;

⁽¹⁾ CdR 261/2011.

14. notes that integration is a two-way process that requires mutual commitment and entails rights and duties for both the host society and migrants. This presupposes a willingness on the part of migrants to take responsibility for fitting into the host society, and a willingness on the part of European Union citizens to accept and absorb migrants;

15. emphasises that integration should be perceived and recognised as a dynamic and ongoing process and not as an intermediary stage in the assimilation of migrants by the host society;

16. believes that policies for integrating migrants must be compatible with fundamental European values such as respect for human rights and diversity, combating discrimination and promotion of equal opportunities and tolerance. They must also be consistent with basic EU policies on cohesion, employment, development, external relations and freedom, security and justice;

17. believes that applying the principle of equal treatment is decisive for the quality of democratic systems, and is a key achievement and integral part of European Union culture;

Implementing integration policy

18. notes that full involvement of migrants in the economic, social and political life of their host cities and regions is essential to realising the Europe 2020 strategy objectives of economic, social and territorial cohesion;

Method

19. believes multilevel governance to be the most appropriate method for achieving optimum integration of migrants. This approach must be compatible with the subsidiarity principle governing cooperation between the EU, Member States and local and regional authorities;

20. commends the European Commission's position that integration policies must be developed at local level on a bottom-up basis;

21. stresses the need for a holistic approach, to take into account not only the economic and social aspects of integration but also issues relating to cultural and religious diversity, citizenship, political rights and the involvement of legal migrants in public and political affairs;

22. emphasises the need for a comprehensive approach and believes that efforts to integrate migrants include a wide range of policies, such as education, employment, social policy, public health, and economic, social and territorial cohesion;

23. believes that a concerted approach that includes local, regional, national and European stakeholders is required to

achieve results. It is essential to involve the relevant EU authorities, national, regional and local authorities, NGOs, the social partners, representatives of civil society, including migrants themselves, whether new arrivals or settled first- and second-generation migrants, together with credible stakeholders in the spheres of sport, culture and social cohesion;

24. believes that a sustained effort should be mounted for all migrants and considers that integration policies should not be exclusively targeted at recent arrivals in cities or regions. Integration measures should also address second- and even third-generation immigrants where needed in order to tackle discrimination effectively;

25. reiterates the importance for local and regional authorities of ensuring equal treatment of immigrants in respect of their access to the labour market, public goods and health and welfare services. This is a necessary condition for tackling discrimination, racism and xenophobia;

26. notes that integration policies should be framed with the particular characteristics and needs of specific vulnerable groups of third-country nationals in mind. These include people seeking and receiving international protection, unaccompanied minors, migrant women, elderly migrants, people with disabilities and people belonging to other vulnerable groups such as the Roma;

27. points out, however, that EU citizens, when moving to live and work in another Member State, may also require services to help them integrate, such as opportunities to study the language;

Means

28. is in favour of encouraging measures to facilitate migrant access to the labour market and to vocational training. For migrants, securing a job is a fundamental step in the process of integrating smoothly into the host community;

29. draws attention to the role played by education in integration, especially learning the language of the host country, with the right to learn the mother tongue being upheld;

30. believes that educating the children of migrants should be a priority and applauds the encouragement of diversity in national education systems. With a view to strengthening diversity within education systems, the CoR calls on Member States and local and regional authorities to consider recruiting teachers from migrants' home countries, with the aim of making the education process function as a cultural bridge between the host community and third-country nationals and also as an impetus towards a productive and cohesive society;

31. supports efforts to secure recognition and accreditation of training and skills acquired by immigrants in their countries of origin. This will make it easier for migrants to enter the labour market and improve their opportunities for accessing education and training in the host country;

32. would point out that promoting equal opportunities for migrants in the fields of education, training and employment is the right way to prevent their social exclusion. The CoR also believes that the positive prospect of attaining an equal position in the host society is the best way of averting the type of violent incidents that have occurred in many European cities;

33. underscores the importance of migrants being actively involved in the systems and institutions of their host society and believes that full and unimpeded participation in political life at local and regional level is a key factor in creating a climate of mutual trust between immigrants and host societies;

34. notes that particular attention should be paid to migrant women, not just because they play a key role in educating children and passing on cultural models, but also because they are the most vulnerable to acts of exclusion, violence and discrimination;

35. considers cross-cultural dialogue to be of critical importance to integration and believes that local and regional authorities must continue adopting initiatives to promote such dialogue. The CoR thinks that improving people's understanding of migrants' culture is an effective way of helping to counter acts of racism and xenophobia;

36. notes that the media play a key role in raising public awareness about immigration and in curbing marginalisation, racism and xenophobia;

37. concurs with the European Commission's communication in recognising the external dimension of immigration policy and emphasises the need to cooperate with migrants' home countries on measures relating to preparations for their integration.

Innovative instruments

38. believes that the territorial pacts provide a flexible framework for putting integration policies into effect because they permit implementation of measures and thematic priorities that are appropriate for each territorial unit and because they can reflect the constitutional provisions of each Member State, the division of powers between different levels of government, and the subsidiarity and proportionality principles;

39. welcomes the European Commission's initiative on introducing European Integration Modules, and believes that these will help to promote best practice and provide another flexible instrument for framing national, regional and local integration

policies. The CoR hopes that mobilising existing expertise will serve local needs and be used to improve outcomes;

Contribution of local and regional authorities

40. is pleased that the new European Agenda is being presented as the joint responsibility of all levels of government concerned and recognises the important role played by local and regional authorities in implementing integration policies;

41. welcomes the European Commission's decision to ensure that local and regional stakeholders are involved in defining integration strategies under the EU programmes and to improve coordination of programming for existing EU funding and promote measures at local level;

42. notes that local and regional authorities play a decisive role in creating the right conditions for third-country nationals to access information and services relating to education, healthcare, employment, housing and other public services. Local and regional authorities are the linchpin that enables immigrants to develop a strong and constructive connection with the host society. This role creates extra costs for regions and municipalities that are often called upon to address integration issues;

43. points out that local and regional authorities operate as service providers and work closely with businesses, organisations and other levels of government to implement integration policies. Through these tasks they help to strengthen corporate social responsibility at local level;

44. draws attention to the role played by local and regional authorities in harnessing European experience and practice through exchange of best practice and publicising in particular the results of their contribution to implementing EU programmes (e.g. CLIP, ERLAIM, ROUTES, City2City, the Eurocities INTI project) and of cross-border regional networks;

45. believes that local and regional authorities play a decisive role in creating the conditions in which third-country nationals can access information and services relating to employment, education, healthcare, housing, culture and other public services, which enables them to build a strong link with their host society;

46. observes that local and regional authorities, because they are in touch with grassroots concerns, pay particular attention to cooperation, communication and exchanging information with the general public, migrant organisations and NGOs. In this way, they make a real contribution to developing a climate of trust, to maintaining cohesion in host communities and thus to demonstrating that migration is an aspect of development and progress;

Monitoring of outcomes

47. welcomes the introduction of common European indicators, agreed on by the Member States in Zaragoza, and believes that they can become an effective tool in monitoring and evaluating integration policy;

48. highlights the particular importance of the European Fund for the Integration of Third-Country Nationals in framing and implementing integration policies and notes that although local and regional authorities play a crucial role in implementing integration policies they have not hitherto been active in setting funding priorities or evaluating outcomes. The CoR believes that its involvement in evaluating outcomes could help to identify more targeted approaches and provide support for more coherent integration strategies;

Strategic partnership with the European Commission

49. welcomes the Commission's view that measures at local level are a key element of the integration strategy, and on the basis of the subsidiarity principle and the multilevel governance approach thinks that it would be useful if initiatives were taken to form a strategic partnership between the CoR and the European Commission and European networks of cities and regions, in order to tap the substantial experience of local and regional authorities, facilitate exchanges of good practice and perspectives, simplify and improve the coordination of measures and publicise outcomes more widely;

Proposals for achieving the targets

50. believes that integration of migrants should be a basic priority of the Union and supports initiatives taken by it to put forward proposals, design new instruments and implement effective policies;

51. considers that in view of economic and demographic developments a common European strategy should be framed to ensure balanced management of immigration flows and promotion of integration;

52. favours concerted action and encouragement of cooperation and dialogue between those involved in integration at local, regional, national and European level;

53. calls on the Member States and regional authorities concerned to take measures to simplify the evaluation and recognition of migrants' professional skills;

54. recommends that language programmes be organised to meet the needs of particular migrant groups;

55. recommends encouraging specific ground-breaking integration measures at local and regional level to effectively address the demographic challenges facing certain regions;

56. urges local and regional authorities to encourage local businesses to strengthen corporate social responsibility at local level;

57. calls on the Member States and the Commission to offer political and financial support to local and regional authorities that play a critical role in implementing integration policies;

58. thinks that the integration process should start in the countries of origin and proposes building on existing cross-border cooperation initiatives between local and regional authorities on either side of the EU's external borders;

59. suggests that issues relevant to workforce migration and integration be discussed during contacts between representatives of local and regional authorities in the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy. The Euro-Mediterranean Regional and Local Assembly (ARLEM), as well as the recently established Conference of Regional and Local Authorities of the Eastern Partnership and the EU (CORLEAP), would be useful instruments for exploring these issues;

60. believes that integration policies should concern circular as well as temporary migrants, while pointing out that circular migration cannot replace permanent migration, and recommends considering the scope for local and regional authorities in both countries of origin and host countries to get involved in mobility partnerships and the process of negotiating such partnerships;

61. reiterates its call for local and regional authorities to be actively involved at a very early stage in the framing of integration strategies and throughout their implementation;

62. asks for the CoR to be involved in setting priorities for EU funding for integration, and in evaluating the outcomes of integration programmes;

63. endorses the setting up of an immigration and asylum fund and calls for earmarking of the necessary resources to ensure adequate funding and effective promotion of integration at local and regional level, including funding for projects at regional level. In the more general context of expenditure in the sphere of home affairs, there is a need to ensure a careful balance between spending on security and borders and spending in areas such as integration of migrants and reception facilities for asylum seekers, spheres where local and regional authorities can provide obvious added value;

64. would like to play a more active part in coordinating measures at European level, and therefore asks, as the representative of local and regional authorities, to be invited to attend

European ministerial conferences on integration on a regular basis, suggests that its presence in the European Integration Forum be stepped up, and expresses its willingness to take on a key role in promoting the territorial pacts;

65. is ready to help with the setting up of a pan-European system for monitoring progress made in integration using joint indicators;

66. thinks that deployment of new instruments such as the territorial pacts should be simplified, and that provision should be made for them to be financed through the Structural Funds and the thematic programmes during the new programming period;

67. recommends introducing third-country national integration "prizes" that would be awarded to immigrants and/or

organisations involved in integration (local and regional authorities, businesses, organisations, associations, institutes, etc.). This initiative could be incorporated into the framework of existing events, such as the UN International Migrants Day;

68. wishes to develop a strategic partnership with the European Commission and European networks of cities and regions so as to facilitate integration of migrants and promote effective policies. This partnership could be created by setting up a network of local and regional authorities for integration, in which policy-making bodies from all levels of government, as well as civil society organisations, could take part. The CoR looks forward to the political, economic and operational support of the European Commission in fully implementing the strategic partnership and believes that it could be incorporated into the framework of existing mechanisms and initiatives.

Brussels, 15 February 2012.

*The President
of the Committee of the Regions*
Mercedes BRESSO
